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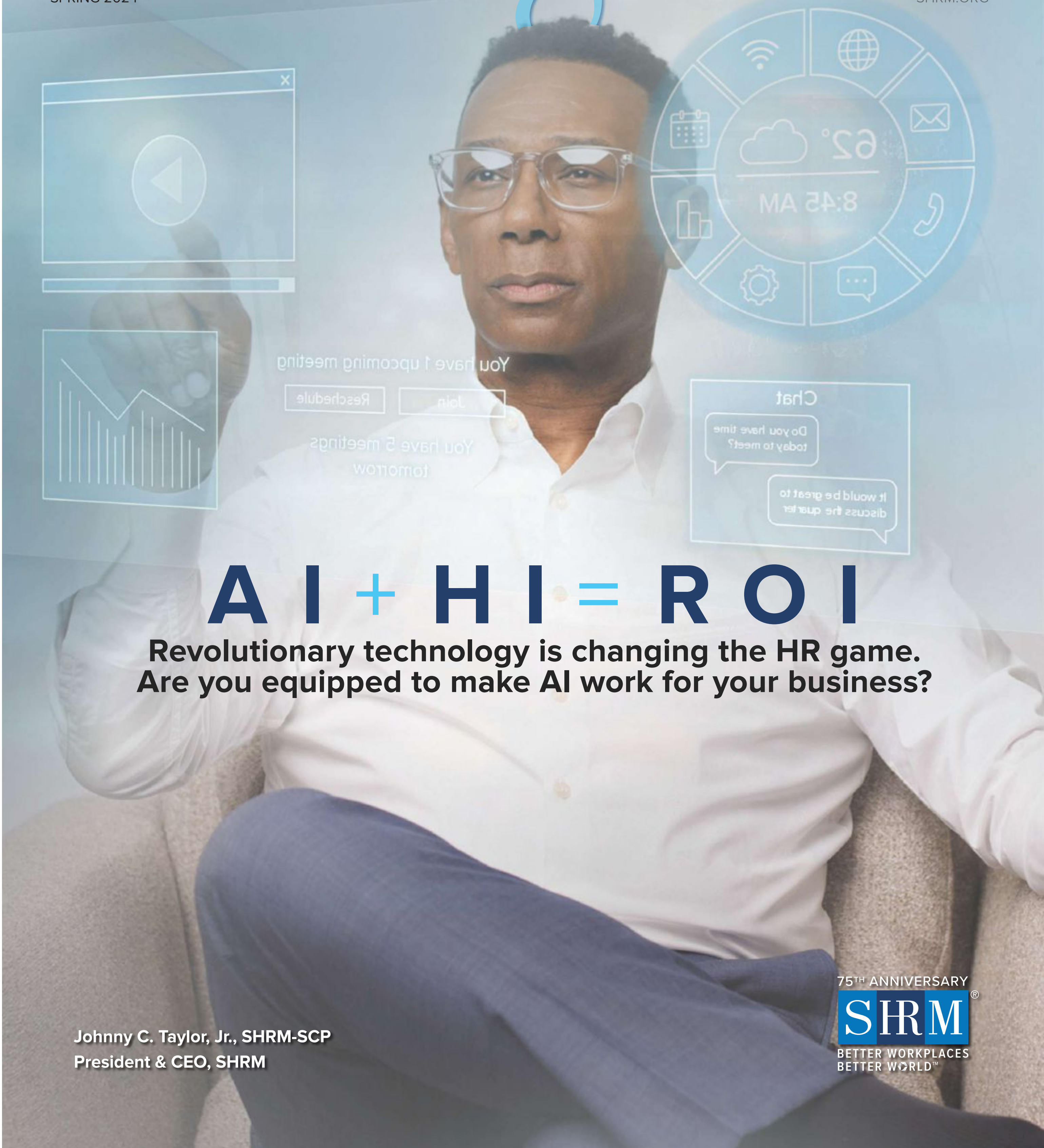

AI + HI = ROI

Revolutionary technology is changing the HR game. Are you equipped to make AI work for your business?

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

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FROM THE CEO

NOTHING TO FEAR

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

Adapt or die. While this may initially sound like a formidable proposition, when we stop to consider it, we realize that's exactly what we, and the generations who preceded us, have been doing our whole lives. The invention of the wheel turned horseback riding into leisure and sport. Electricity made candlelight little more than ambience. The radio replaced the telegraph, which replaced carrier pigeons and messengers. And the internet made obsolete … well, more things than I could list here.

We laugh at some of these bygone methods. Of course, no one would miss the carrier pigeon, right? But if you put yourself in the shoes of your 19th-century predecessors, you might find you have more in common with them than you thought. With the use of pigeons for commerce, navigation and even war, pigeon trainers, known as pigeoneers, must have feared how their jobs would be affected as the telegraph came on the scene. But their fear didn't keep the telegraph, and later the radio, from becoming integral parts of society.

Two hundred years later, we find ourselves in a similar spot, many of us dragging our feet and wanting to hang on to our era's equivalent of the carrier pigeon when the grand new world of artificial intelligence is at our fingertips, waiting to be explored.

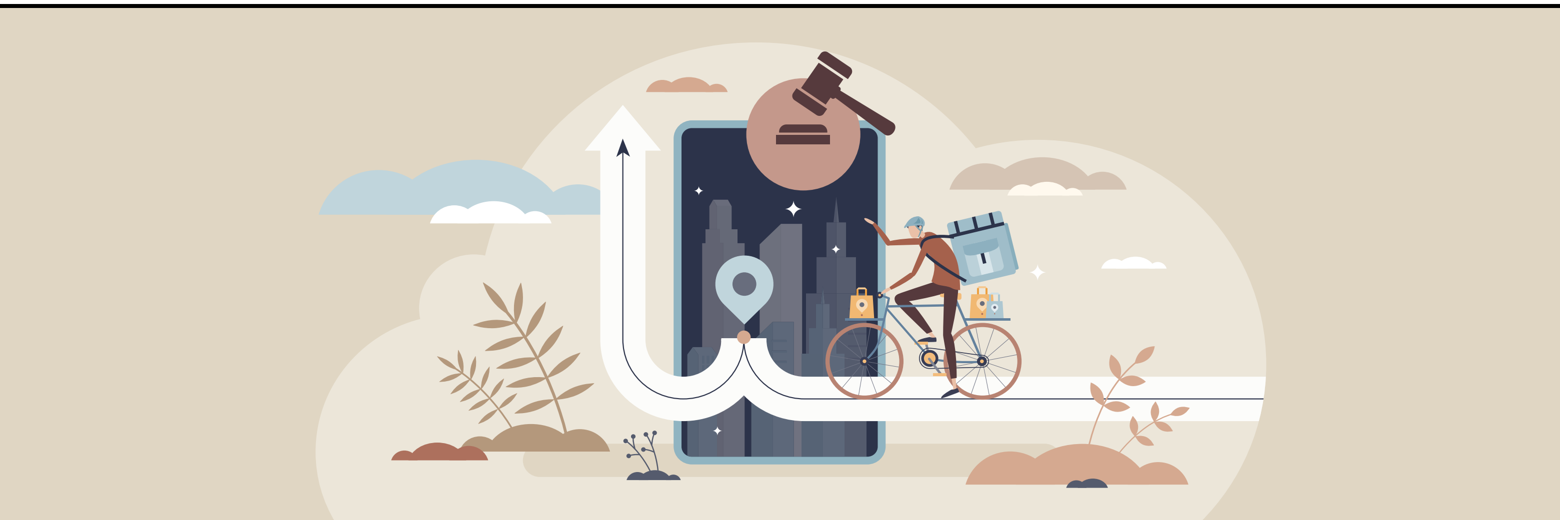
If there is one aspect of the advance of AI that all parties agree on, it is this: Generative AI will bring dramatic change. In fact, the magnitude of its expected impact is precisely why many fear its adoption. Just as the internet swept in and changed the way we operate as a society, so will AI, despite our reservations. But the adoption of this technology does not have to be feared.

> We have to lead the way in normalizing use of this technology and showing employees how AI is just another tool at their disposal—one that can make their lives easier.

As HR professionals, we have a huge opportunity, and also the responsibility, to help our employees stay competitive in this ever-evolving world of work. We must provide specialized trainings; support reskilling, upskilling and cross-skilling by subsidizing continued education; and provide access to generative AI and encourage our employees to start experimenting with it. We have to lead the way in normalizing use of this technology and showing employees how AI is just another tool at their disposal—one that can make their lives easier by helping with monotonous and low-effort tasks.

I'll leave you with something I've emphasized time and again: AI (artificial intelligence) plus HI (human intelligence) equals ROI (return on investment). This has never been about eliminating humans—it is and should always be about making human beings more efficient and more effective as we continuously strive to make better workplaces for a better world. With the assistance of AI, and a little upskilling, we'll be able to achieve more than our predecessors could ever have imagined. HR

PHOTOGRAPH BY CADE MARTIN FOR *HR MAGAZINE*



VECTORMINE / ISTOCK

NEW RULE COULD LIMIT USE OF INDEPENDENT CONTRACTORS

A U.S. Labor Department rule could spur more misclassification lawsuits.

By Leah Shepherd

The new independent contractor rule from the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) could make it more difficult for employers to classify workers as independent contractors.

That may spark more misclassification lawsuits and discourage businesses from hiring gig workers, according to some legal experts. The final rule, which was scheduled to take effect March 11, restores an earlier standard that required companies to weigh a variety of economic factors together to determine whether a worker is an employee or an independent contractor.

"We're making sure workers get the protections they need while also leveling the playing field for employers," Acting Secretary of Labor Julie Su said in a January press briefing. When businesses misclassify workers, "it's not fair to their law-abiding competitors."

However, the more employee-friendly standard could potentially usher in a wave of misclassification lawsuits under the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), says Mark Goldstein, an attorney with Reed Smith in New York City.

The rule has major ramifications for the gig economy because app-based platforms have typically classified their delivery drivers and other gig workers as independent contractors. Industries such as construction, transportation, trucking and media could be significantly impacted, as well, says Allan Bloom, an attorney with Proskauer in New York City.

Many businesses are familiar with how to comply with the earlier standard that existed before 2021, Bloom says.

"At the end of the day, it's the courts that really have the power to make that determination" about whether an employer misclassified a worker, he says.

The regulation will likely make companies more wary of hiring short-term contractors, says Wayne Winegarden, an economist with the Pacific Research Institute, a nonpartisan, free-market think tank in Pasadena, Calif., which has filed a lawsuit challenging the rule. It's "particularly problematic for small businesses because they don't have the staff or the money to deal with compliance," he says.

A coalition of business groups including the Coalition for Workforce Innovation, Associated Builders and Contractors, and the Financial Services Institute also filed a legal challenge in January. Uber and Lyft are part of the coalition, but both made statements saying they didn't think the rule would affect the way they do business. A group of freelance writers and editors also challenged the rule.

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 DOL's final rule rescinds a 2021 rule in which two core factors—control over the work and opportunity for profit or loss—carried greater weight. Under the new rule, employers would use a totality-of-the-circumstances analysis, in which none of the factors carry greater weight.

The new test includes six factors:

- The degree to which the employer controls how the work is done.
- The worker's opportunity for profit or loss.
- The amount of skill and initiative required for the work.
- The degree of permanence of the working relationship.
- The worker's investment in equipment or materials required for the task.
- The extent to which the service rendered is an integral part of the employer's business.

Other factors can be considered.

The final rule drew criticism from many business groups. The rule "is clearly biased towards declaring most independent contractors as employees, a move that will decrease flexibility and opportunity and result in lost earning opportunities for millions of Americans," says Marc Freedman, vice president of workplace policy for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce in Washington, D.C. "It threatens the flexibility of individuals to work when and how they want and could have significant negative impacts on our economy."

In public comments to the DOL, SHRM said the totality-of-the-circumstances test will require more time and resources to apply, creating more confusion and uncertainty for employers.

TIPS FOR HR

In light of the new standard, HR professionals and employers should include class-action waivers in all arbitration agreements that they use with independent contractors, Bloom says.

In addition, they should take an inventory of all the classifications for their workers with a 1099 tax arrangement, he says. Make sure HR knows when, how and where independent contractors are engaged and what types of agreements the company is using, "rather than 100 people across the company doing it differently," he recommends.

With legal challenges underway, Andrew McKinley, an attorney with Seyfarth in Atlanta, says "workers and businesses will be left to wrestle with the meaning of the department's uncertain guidance, its legal viability and, ultimately, whether it will shift again with future administration changes."

Leah Shepherd is former senior legal editor for SHRM.

EMAIL MISTAKES

Almost three-quarters of 1,043 U.S. adults surveyed in October said they had committed some sort of email faux pas in the previous 12 months. Some even admitted to intentionally sending emails to get co-workers in trouble.

Sent emails complaining about a manager or colleague to a work friend	20.4%
Emailed everyone in the department by accident	19.1%
Forwarded an email chain to get someone into trouble	16.8%
Sent an email chain accidentally to someone mentioned unfavorably in the thread	16.1%
Emailed everyone in the company by accident	15.3%
Emailed confidential information to the wrong person	15.1%
CC'd the wrong person	14.8%
BCC'd or CC'd someone's manager to get them into trouble	12.7%

Source: EmailToolTester.

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MENOPAUSE BENEFITS GAIN INTEREST

Menopause benefits—such as virtual care and hormone therapy support—are a small but growing workplace trend. Companies including Microsoft, Abercrombie & Fitch Co. and pharmaceutical firm Sanofi are among the roughly 4 percent of employers offering such benefits to their workforces.

Although the number is small, it has big potential for growth, according to data from NFP, a benefits consultancy firm. About one-third of the HR leaders who responded to NFP's recent survey said they would be open to adding a menopause benefit in the next five years.

So how can HR leaders implement such a benefit? Here are tips from industry insiders:

Get feedback from employees. HR and benefits leaders should go on a listening tour with several employees who are going through menopause or have gone through menopause, says Kate Ryder, CEO of Maven Clinic.

That way, she says, HR leaders can "understand what they need and what's been lacking."

Consider working with a provider. Providers including Maven Clinic, Midi Health and Carrot Fertility have menopause benefits products that employers can offer to employees. Many of these providers have specific expertise and training in menopause care.

That simplified things for Microsoft when it added a menopause benefit in July through Maven Clinic, says Sonja Kellen, Microsoft's senior director of global health and wellness.

"Having that solution, where you're really helping guide [employees] and give them the support and the resources to help them on that journey, is important," she says.

Other employers have implemented menopause-specific paid leave so that employees going through menopause can take time off when they're experiencing symptoms.

Make sure menopause benefits are supplemented. Menopause benefits should be supplemented by a comprehensive suite of employee benefits, including mental health help, generous paid time off and flexible schedules.

"You need to make sure employees have holistic health care, they have sick leave, robust time away," Kellen says.

Train company leaders. Training should be given to managers and others about menopause and other age-related health experiences, Kellen says. Give them tips on how to discuss it in a way that feels safe and comfortable, she says.

Work with a women's group or employee resource group (ERG). "We can work together with them to address the stigma around menopause in the workplace and get the word out that help is available to them," says Joanna Strober, CEO and founder of Midi Health.

Educate employees. Simply introducing a menopause benefit doesn't ensure that people will take advantage of it.

"Because of ongoing myths, miseducation and stigmas about talking about hormonal change, many women may not even recognize what is happening to their bodies, especially in the early stages of perimenopause," Strober says. "Others may choose to suffer in silence because of misinformation about the different types of help available to them and the actual risks and benefits of therapies."

Educational tools, such as webinars, can teach employees how to recognize the symptoms of perimenopause and menopause, when to seek care, and the pros and cons of treatment options.

Although menopause is thought of as a women's health issue, a good rule of thumb is for HR leaders to develop educational programming for male allies at work, as well. "We have found men to be very interested in educating themselves in order to better support the women in their lives," Strober says, "so they can be not only better partners but better colleagues and managers."

—Kathryn Mayer

THE DEMAND FOR MENOPAUSE BENEFITS

64% of 2,000 women between the ages of 40 and 65 surveyed by Bank of America in 2023 want menopause-specific benefits.

$1.8 billion is the estimated annual cost to the U.S. economy in terms of lost working time due to menopause, according to Mayo Clinic.

$26.6 billion is the total estimated cost to the U.S. economy of menopause when medical expenses are added in.

BRO VECTOR / ISTOCK

EMPLOYEES WILL SWITCH JOBS FOR SMALLER PAY HIKES

Employees are willing to leave their jobs for a smaller pay increase than in the past, a recent report found.

While 73 percent of employees say they would consider leaving their current job for a higher paycheck, they also noted they'd quit for a smaller raise than in previous years, according to a survey of 1,500 workers from HR tech firm BambooHR.

Respondents say it would take only a 13.3 percent pay jump to tempt them away from their current position, down from 16.1 percent in 2022.

"Money is still a key driving force behind employee satisfaction, happiness and retention," says Kelsey Tarp, senior manager, HR business partner, at BambooHR. "If a small pay increase is all it takes for an employee to leave their current role, employers should prioritize looking into market trends and adjusting salaries accordingly to attract and retain top talent."

Part of the reason employees would make a move for less money may be because employee dissatisfaction with pay is growing. More than a quarter of women (27 percent) expressed frustration with their compensation (up from 16 percent in 2022), compared with 15 percent of men (up from 11 percent in 2022), according to BambooHR's survey. Just over 40 percent of workers surveyed hadn't received a salary increase in the past 12 months. For those who did get a raise, the average salary increase was 4.6 percent, compared with 6.2 percent in 2022.

Salary hikes are expected to continue to slow, with employers planning an average of between 3.8 percent and 4 percent in 2024, surveys by WTW and Mercer show.

"If employees are unhappy with their current job, it makes sense that a pay increase, even a slight one, would entice them to switch," Tarp says. "Cost of living and inflation are top of mind for employees, so if there's a new job that offers a little more financial stability, employees will likely take the opportunity."

Employer stability also plays into employees' decisions.

"If an employer has reduced overall headcount and an employee now has fewer opportunities for growth," Tarp notes, "moving to a job with more stability and a pay bump could be a very attractive and enticing option."

—Kathryn Mayer

MOST UNPOPULAR JOBS

The least sought-after jobs are determined by the average number of clicks per advertised vacancy listed on the jobs search engine Adzuna in the fourth quarter of 2023. Ranked from the least popular, they are:

1. Pharmacy technician.
2. Restaurant host.
3. Hospitality front desk agent.
4. Hotel housekeeper/room attendant.
5. Trash collector.
6. Receiver/stocker.
7. Fast food worker.
8. Merchandiser.
9. Travel physical therapist.
10. Patient support desk agent.
11. Retail cashier.
12. Warehouse package handler/loader.
13. Postal worker.
14. Security officer.
15. Customer service.

ALEXEY YAREMENKO / ISTOCK

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LONG WORK HOURS LOWER PRODUCTIVITY

Your employees may be burning the proverbial midnight oil, putting in time beyond the normal workday, but that doesn't mean they're more productive, according to a new global survey.

Forty percent of 10,333 workers surveyed said they regularly work after hours, and half said they feel pressured to do so—mostly because they otherwise don't have enough time to complete their tasks or have too many competing priorities. However, employees who log off at the end of the workday registered 20 percent higher productivity scores than those who felt obligated to work after the normal workday.

The report is based on a Qualtrics survey for Slack conducted in 2023 with full-time workers in Australia, France, Germany, Japan, the U.K. and the U.S.

While some professions, such as nursing, truck driving and factory work, routinely require working longer than the traditional 9-to-5, the survey focused on desk-based workers.

Half of all respondents said they don't take work breaks; researchers found those workers were 1.7 times more likely to suffer burnout.

"Constantly feeling like you need to catch up is hurting employees and businesses," wrote Christina Janzer, senior vice president of research and analytics at Slack and head of Slack's Workforce Lab, in the report.

"This underscores the importance of building a culture of trust where employees feel safe enough to speak up when they need help prioritizing and have the right balance of time in the workday to get work done," she wrote.

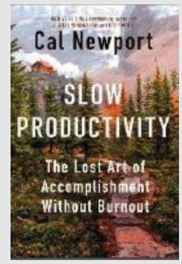
Meeting fatigue may be part of the problem. Twenty-three percent of individual contributors said they spend too much time in meetings—and that percentage increases as one progresses up the organizational chart.

A majority of workers overall said spending more than two hours a day in meetings is the tipping point for them, cutting into the time they have to focus on their work. Email is no help, either: 21 percent of individual contributors said email overload is pulling them away from their tasks.

—Kathy Gurchiek

BOOKSHELF

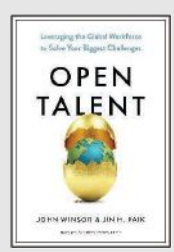
RECOMMENDED READING



SLOW PRODUCTIVITY: THE LOST ART OF ACCOMPLISHMENT WITHOUT BURNOUT

By Cal Newport

Long before the arrival of pinging inboxes and clogged schedules, history's most creative and impactful philosophers, scientists, artists and writers mastered the art of producing valuable work with staying power. Drawing from research on the habits and mindsets of a cast of storied thinkers—from Galileo to Georgia O'Keeffe—the author lays out the key principles of "slow productivity," a more sustainable alternative to the aimless overwhelm that defines our current moment. Combining cultural criticism with systematic pragmatism, Newport deconstructs the absurdities inherent in standard notions of productivity and then provides step-by-step advice for cultivating a slower, more humane alternative.



OPEN TALENT: LEVERAGING THE GLOBAL WORKFORCE TO SOLVE YOUR BIGGEST CHALLENGES

By John Winsor & Jin H. Paik

With sparsely populated offices and people working from wherever they are, and with AI emerging everywhere in business, our work lives have undergone a remarkable transformation seemingly overnight. But the reality is that for years, the ever-growing digital wave has been breaking down organizational boundaries and increasing the adoption of open innovation, including the use of crowdsourcing platforms as a talent solution. The imperative is clear: Adapt to and leverage this new, digitally enabled world of "open talent" or get left behind.

This eye-opening guidebook shows how the massive reset of the pandemic allowed talented workers everywhere to exit their jobs without leaving the workforce. Now, many are freelancing for multiple companies or starting small businesses, challenging hiring managers as never before amid a transformed workforce.

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TAKING ACTION, TAKING A STAND

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WHEN A LOVED ONE DIES

What should we do when an employee requests extended bereavement leave?

It's not unusual for an employee to ask for extended bereavement leave in the wake of the death of a loved one. Employees who need to travel to attend a funeral may request additional time off, and employees experiencing mental anguish after losing someone close may require extended leave. Although there is no federal law that requires employers to provide bereavement leave, five states—California, Oregon, Illinois, Maryland and Washington—have passed regulations that require both public and private employers in those states to grant bereavement leave in some form.

Absent any federal or state regulations, an individual employer's policies and practices determine whether its employees are granted bereavement leave. Most employers do provide a form of paid bereavement leave, and some organizations have also established policies that provide extended leave if a funeral is out of town or an employee requests additional time to process their loss. In 2023, almost 91 percent of employers offered a form of paid bereavement leave, a 10 percent increase over 2016.

If an employee has a qualifying medical condition, such as depression, as a result of their loss and requests extended bereavement leave beyond what their employer offers, they may qualify for unpaid leave under the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) or the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Upon receiving such a request, an employer must determine if the employee qualifies for leave and if the employer is required to provide it.

Usually, if an employee qualifies for leave under the FMLA, their employer will offer that leave first, since it gives the employee the greatest protection. While the length of FMLA leave is determined by a medical provider's estimation, under the ADA an employer may be exempt from accommodating leave if it is deemed too significant a hardship on the company.

If either an employee or their employer is not covered under the FMLA—because the employee has worked for their employer for less than a year or the employer has fewer than 50 employees—the employer should offer leave under the ADA. While leave under the FMLA or ADA is unpaid, employers are required to provide job protection for an employee to return to work in the same or a similar position. HR

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

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A HELPING HAND

Volunteer programs can build morale while benefiting the community.

By Dana Wilkie

Employer-sponsored volunteer programs can build goodwill within the local community and boost a company's image. They also can help retain employees by teaching them new skills and improving their morale, according to a 2023 global study conducted for investment company Ares Management by Edge Research.

In a survey of more than 5,000 full-time workers, researchers found that 79 percent of employees who volunteer through work-sponsored programs are satisfied with their jobs, compared to 55 percent who don't volunteer this way.

However, developing a workplace volunteer program requires time, resources and usually some financing, all of which may be scarce at small companies.

At DailyRemote, a New York City-based online board for remote job hunters, HR talent acquisition specialist Daniel Wolken recalls that creating a volunteer program in 2019 "with just three of us in HR and a $5,000 budget wasn't easy."

"For other companies starting out, especially small ones, my advice would be to take it gradually," Wolken says. "Rolling it out step by step lets you better organize and adapt as needed. In our case, with 50-plus employees worldwide, the program has been really rewarding for morale."

GETTING STARTED

Looking to create a volunteer program? Experts recommend taking the following steps.

Pick a cause. The focus of an employee volunteer program could be homelessness, climate change or racial equity. However, make sure to choose a cause that interests employees and isn't just the CEO's pet project.

"Volunteer programs may fizzle despite executive buy-in if employees feel like they don't have ownership and the ability to decide on the nonprofits and causes that their organizations support," says Lee Fabiaschi, vice president for employee engagement and community impact at Ares Management in New York City.

Another factor to consider is the range of generations in your workforce. In many of the workplaces discussed in Ares' survey findings and interviews, there are four generations: Generation Z (born 1997-2012), Millennials (born 1981-1996), Generation X (born 1965-1980) and Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964).

"With that comes different priorities and desires," Fabiaschi says. "A workplace volunteer program that addresses all employees' needs and interests might not be possible, so employers should consider a variety of options to engage workers in volunteer activities."

Find out what interests your employees and how they want the program to work. You should also get input from different departments.

Learn your workers' skills. Match them with organizations that could use their expertise.

For example, Common Impact is a small, New York City-based organization of 25 remote workers who run virtual and in-person volunteer events. Common Impact's team recently worked with America Needs You, a local nonprofit that provides first-generation college students with interviewing and resume advice.

"We did the project while we were [on an] annual retreat, and it was a deeply rewarding team-building experience in support of an exceptional group of young people whose futures look bright," says Leila Saad, Common Impact's CEO. "Volunteer programs don't have to be big or flashy. Something as simple as reviewing a

'Volunteer programs don't have to be big or flashy. Something as simple as reviewing a resume can create a profound and lasting impact on a person.'

LEILA SAAD

resume can create a profound and lasting impact on a person."

Develop a plan. Decide whether the volunteer program will be in person or virtual, how many volunteers will be needed, and how much time they must commit. Present the plan to senior leaders to ensure they're on board and will fund the program. Companies can spend as little as $2,000 to $5,000 to start a program, Saad says, although larger corporations typically invest more.

Provide appropriate training. Work with the volunteer organization to ensure that it provides appropriate guidelines and safety rules to protect the company and its employees.

"Oftentimes, [nonprofits] assume that working with volunteers is as easy as having them walk in and get them working, no paperwork involved," says Michelle D. Jimenez, SHRM-SCP, HR director at Settlement Housing Fund, which creates affordable-housing programs in New York City. "That's far from the truth. There are many factors you need to consider—labor laws, documentation, creating volunteers' job descriptions, spelling out the work they'll do and supervising them."

This, she says, may require collaboration between the employer and the nonprofit.

The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) has strict guidelines for what constitutes a volunteer at a nonprofit and what doesn't. Take this into account or you could be setting your organization—and the nonprofit—up for lawsuits. Work with nonprofit managers to develop volunteer job descriptions in line with DOL standards.

Implement the program. Share the volunteer opportunity with workers. Strongly encourage senior leaders and managers to participate.

"Our research points out how important it is for corporate leaders to model volunteerism," says Michelle Armstrong, managing director and head of philanthropy at Ares. "More than half of those surveyed for our global study [53 percent] say that they might not participate in a workplace volunteer program if those senior to them don't make it a priority. They make clear that standing shoulder to shoulder with executives at a volunteer site makes the program feel more authentic."

Monitor the program. Once the program is up and running, track participation, costs, compliance, time commitments, rewards and challenges. Tweak the program as needed.

"It's important to note that some of these steps may run simultaneously, especially once the program gets rolling," Jimenez says.

Acknowledge the volunteers' efforts. This might include a small gift, such as a company coffee mug or a simple "thank you" in the company newsletter. But make sure employees don't feel they're forced to volunteer or they'll disengage, according to the Ares study.

TACKLING CHALLENGES

Solo HR practitioners have limited time and funding for nonessential efforts such as volunteer programs. As a result, they might need to lean on other employees within the company to help.

In developing a volunteer program for a previous employer, Ricky Torres, SHRM-CP, HR operations manager at 3M in Michigan and Ohio, created a committee of employees representing different departments.

Torres says the committee met at least once a month to plan service projects for employees throughout the year, including collecting holiday gifts for needy families and allowing employees to help serve food to homeless people during work hours.

By giving everyone a voice, the committee helped increase engagement. In addition to providing extra hands to assist with the work, it also opened the door to new ideas.

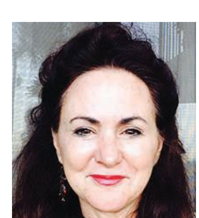
"There may be different ways to contribute, different ways to volunteer, that you may not know exist," Torres says. "But by getting other people involved, you get different perspectives."

Large companies can simply write a check to a local charity. But community groups also need hands-on volunteers.

"If you're a small employer, you can incentivize employees by giving them four hours of time off every quarter so they can go and volunteer," Torres says. "There's a lot of ways to help out."

He offers one final piece of advice: Don't think you have to do it alone.

"Just because you're an HR department of one," he says, "doesn't mean you can't find other stakeholders to help you." HR



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PARSING THE EEOC'S PROPOSED GUIDANCE ON HARASSMENT

It's time to rethink investigations and corrective actions in light of the EEOC's proposal.

By Jonathan A. Segal

ILLUSTRATION BY ADAM NIKLEWICZ FOR *HR MAGAZINE*

Last fall, the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) proposed updated enforcement guidance on harassment in the workplace. While the EEOC may make some clarifications in response to public comments, it's not likely to make material changes, so now is a good time to digest and operationalize the proposed guidance.

The EEOC's proposed guidance recommends specific steps that employers should take to prevent and remedy harassment in terms of policies, complaint procedures, training, investigations and corrective action. This article focuses on three of the more salient issues regarding investigations and corrective actions.

'PROMPT AND ADEQUATE' INVESTIGATIONS

In prior publications, the EEOC said an employer's investigation must be "prompt, thorough and impartial." In the proposed guidance, the EEOC says an investigation must be only "prompt and adequate."

Employers are well advised to substitute "adequate" for "thorough and impartial" in their policies and procedures, as well as in their decision-making relative to specific investigations. Here's why:

The proposed guidance provides that an investigation is adequate "if it is *sufficiently thorough* to arrive at a reasonably fair estimate of truth." The term *thorough* implies more than *sufficiently thorough*. You don't want to create an expectation of "thoroughness" that you may not need to meet.

Investigating too much can be as much of a problem as investigating too little, both legally and culturally. I have seen more than a few cases where the "thoroughness" of the investigation resulted in so many employees learning of the complaint that the investigation itself harmed both the complainant and the accused.

Impartial may imply that the investigation must be conducted by a third party, independent of the employer. However, an investigation isn't compromised just because it's not conducted by an independent third party. In most cases, HR can be impartial.

Further, involving an outsider may escalate the matter in the mind of the

complainant, who may feel the need to respond in kind. As with investigating too much, going outside can increase the likelihood of litigation and send a negative message culturally that HR does not have the credibility to be impartial.

Of course, there are times when HR will not have the credibility to be impartial—for example, when HR reports to or is subject to the authority of the accused. In these circumstances, using an outside investigator—independent of the employer—is generally recommended.

THINK TWICE BEFORE ADOPTING A ZERO TOLERANCE POLICY

Employers are cautioned not to adopt a zero tolerance standard. As I learned from serving on the EEOC's Select Task Force on the Study of Harassment in the Workplace, zero tolerance policies may be counterproductive in that they may chill reporting. More specifically, employees may choose not to report harassment if they fear that the result will be the automatic termination of the accused.

There's a second reason I caution against zero tolerance policies: They breed zero tolerance. Not all harassment is clear-cut. We need to give an employee who makes a good-faith mistake the opportunity to learn and grow from it. Workplace "cancel culture" not only will result in unfair punishment; it also will result in individuals avoiding those they fear may try to cancel them—and that's the antithesis of inclusion. —J.A.S.

WHEN NOT TO INVESTIGATE

Often, an employee requests that the employer not investigate concerns they have raised. Many employers respond by saying that all concerns must be investigated, with no exceptions. This response is an overstatement that may destroy workplace relationships and turn a relatively minor issue into a major issue. Fortunately, the EEOC's proposed guidance, at least implicitly, recognizes this reality.

Citing appellate case law authority, the EEOC says, "It may be reasonable in some circumstances to honor the employee's request [not to investigate] when the conduct is relatively mild." However, the EEOC quickly adds that if the conduct is severe, it would not be reasonable to honor the employee's request. I would add that it likely would not be reasonable to honor the employee's request if other employees are affected by or have witnessed the conduct at issue.

Who makes the determination whether to investigate? If you say nothing, the people manager will.

But what a people manager may see as an isolated occurrence may actually be part of a more serious pattern. Further, most people managers will not have adequate knowledge of the legal and cultural issues associated with evaluating allegations of harassment.

For these and other reasons, every people manager should be required to report to HR all concerns of harassment expressed to them, regardless of the wishes of the complaining party. The determination of whether to investigate should be up to HR as it looks at the big picture.

If HR makes the decision to honor the employee's wishes and not investigate, it is recommended that HR document the factors it considered in making its decision, to help demonstrate that its decision was a thoughtful balancing of interests.

In addition to any documentation HR may prepare for its file, HR should consider documenting the following things directly with the employee:

- The specific conduct complained of.
- The employee's request not to investigate.
- The employer's commitment to investigate, should the employee change their mind, with appropriate assurances of confidentiality and nonretaliation.

CORRECTIVE ACTION

When an employer concludes that there has been harassing conduct, the employer must take corrective action. Implicit in the foregoing focus on harassing conduct is the recommendation that employers not reach a legal conclusion that there has been unlawful harassment or wait until conduct is unlawful to take corrective action.

In its new guidance, the EEOC echoes the U.S. Supreme Court in stating that the corrective action must be "reasonably calculated to prevent further harassment" or harassing conduct. However, it's not as simple as focusing prospectively. In determining what is reasonable, the EEOC will focus on proportionality relative to what the wrongdoer did wrong. So there should be some element of counseling or discipline when the accused, in fact, did wrong.

In this regard, again citing case law, the EEOC provides a number of examples of where one occurrence may be sufficiently severe in and of itself to constitute unlawful harassment. One example is the use of the "n-word" by a supervisor in the presence of a Black subordinate.

When an employee's conduct is severe enough to violate the law, termination of employment may be the only defensible corrective action, legally and culturally, particularly if the wrongdoer is a manager. Employers have a heightened responsibility to protect employees from those who have been granted authority over them. HR

Jonathan A. Segal is a partner at Duane Morris in Philadelphia and a SHRM columnist.

TECH TALK

THE MANY COSTS OF HR SOFTWARE SPRAWL

Flawed governance and suspect buying decisions have created a growing HR 'technology debt' in many organizations.

By Dave Zielinski

As more HR leaders look to emerging technologies as a means of easing growing workloads or better supporting business strategy, many also are falling victim to a related problem: HR "software sprawl" that creates waste, results in unrealized returns from technology investments and undermines the employee experience.

Flawed purchasing decisions and poor governance of existing technologies can often lead to problems such as too many HR software-as-a-service (SaaS) licenses going unused, costly redundancies and data security issues when legacy platforms aren't decommissioned as new ones come online, and missed opportunities when HR departments can't take advantage of innovative features in new software releases from technology vendors.

REINING IN TECHNOLOGY APPETITES

Mark Stelzner, founder and managing principal of IA, an HR advisory firm in Atlanta, says these issues combine to create a form of "technology

‘Very often we see organizations wanting to invest in HR technologies simply because their peers are investing, without seeking to solve a specific business problem in their own companies.’

JOHN KOSTOULAS

debt” for HR that threatens to hinder aspirations and acts as a headwind at a time when new technologies such as generative AI promise many game-changing productivity and efficiency benefits.

A 2023 study from Productiv, an SaaS intelligence platform in Palo Alto, Calif., found that 53 percent of SaaS licenses go unused in organizations, creating significant waste and untapped value from software purchases. Stelzner says he recently worked with an organization that examined its software purchasing history and found that over a seven-year period, it never used 50 percent of the software licenses it purchased from existing vendors.

These licenses sit fallow for a number of reasons, Stelzner says. One is that technology vendors increasingly incentivize HR leaders to buy “bundles” of modules and capabilities on technology platforms rather than purchasing them a la carte by individual feature.

“There’s often financial motivation for HR to purchase modules far ahead of their readiness for deployment,” Stelzner says. "As a result, many HR functions end up with more licenses than their organization can absorb in real time."

In other cases, HR leaders simply become enamored with the "shiny new thing," or have a fear of missing out on emerging technologies, contributing to the proliferation of applications in companies. The Productiv study found that large organizations now have an average of 371 SaaS applications, an increase of 32 percent from 2021.

"Most organizations also now have anywhere from 15 to 50 different HR technologies," Stelzner says. "And the release cycles for SaaS updates on those different platforms are not synchronized by any stretch, so HR functions are being constantly bombarded with new capabilities." Few organizations are therefore structured to capitalize on continuing innovations that HR technology providers make in their software products, Stelzner says.

At the same time as they're adding new platforms or applications, many HR functions are slow to decommission the old systems that those new technologies are designed to replace. Stelzner worked with a global organization of 65,000 employees whose rationale for investing in new HR technology platforms was based in large part on decommissioning more than 350 existing systems and reducing the number of full-time employees supporting those systems by about 30.

"What we found instead in the aftermath of the investments was that no systems had been decommissioned, and in fact 20 new systems had been purchased," Stelzner says. "The company also had doubled its staff in support of HR technology systems."

A GOVERNANCE ISSUE

Another factor driving HR software sprawl and this growing technology debt is flawed governance of existing technology systems. Stacia Garr, co-founder and principal analyst of RedThread Research, an HR research and advisory firm in Woodside, Calif., says that while questionable buying decisions contribute to the problem, governance is the bigger issue.

"For example, there are often 'shadow' systems both within HR and outside of it, technology that has been bought without any coordination with a central body," Garr says.

But the answer to that problem isn't always to require strict, centralized approval of every HR technology purchase, Garr explains. "That would stifle experimentation and innovation," she says. "Instead, organizations should have a two-track strategy of pilots and experimentation, with some tech on one track, which can be decentralized, and then bigger, managed and centrally aligned tech investments where the use cases have been proven."

The problem of ungoverned shadow systems increasingly applies to AI, where more employees are using generative AI tools such as OpenAI's ChatGPT or Google's Bard without formal approval or oversight from their organizations. A 2023 study by corporate social networking platform Fishbowl found that 70 percent of respondents hadn't told their bosses they were using ChatGPT at work.

Experts say the shadow use of AI by employees can lead to problems such as introducing bias to recruiting, performance management or succession management processes, since algorithms are used in those cases without oversight or evaluation from a central body.

Some technology vendors are addressing that problem by developing tools that can track AI use in organizations. ActivTrak, for example, recently introduced a tool that automatically detects and classifies the use of AI tools and websites to help organizations better manage use of the technology. The enhanced visibility is designed to uncover trends and patterns of employee AI use, according to a spokesperson for Austin, Texas-based ActivTrak, as well as mitigate security risks by detecting the use of unauthorized AI tools.

NEEDED: BETTER TECH-BUYING DECISIONS

The origin of software sprawl and diminished return on technology investments also can be traced further upstream, to the buying process. A recent study of 500 HR leaders by Gartner found that 83 percent regretted a recent HR technology-buying decision. John

> 'It's important to remember that even if you have the most tightly managed process for technology acquisition and decommissioning, you can still have security risks due to what happens outside of your organization.'
>
> STACIA GARR

Kostoulas, a vice president and analyst with Gartner who specializes in HR technologies, called that finding "mind-blowing" and says Gartner's research has uncovered other concerning practices in HR's technology-purchasing strategies.

Additional, broader research has produced similar findings. According to a 2023 study by software review firm Capterra, almost 60 percent of U.S. businesses regret at least one of the software purchases they've made in the last 12 to 18 months. And a recent joint study from the Boston Consulting Group and the World Federation of People Management Associations found that just 35 percent of HR professionals believe their functions are using relevant digital technologies.

Kostoulas believes many HR

OUT WITH THE OLD ...

One of the contributors to HR software sprawl and costly duplication of technology systems is the failure of organizations to decommission outdated platforms when newer ones are purchased.

There are valid reasons for being slow to purge legacy HR technologies, including older, on-premises software still holding critical HR data needed for the future or to comply with regulatory requirements; legacy systems that still serve as a critical link in connecting a customized web of disparate platforms; or for other business continuity reasons.

Yet, in many cases, failure to decommission old systems is simply a matter of poor planning, procrastination or neglect.

Some companies have begun to tackle the problem with a more direct approach. Ben Eubanks, chief research officer for Lighthouse Research, an HR advisory and research firm in Huntsville, Ala., knows of one large organization that addressed the issue with a firm new policy.

"The information technology group created a policy where anyone bringing in a new solution had to list two for decommissioning at the same time," Eubanks says. "It really forced people to decide if the new technology system was simply 'cool' or if it was a true problem-solver."

John Kostoulas, a vice president and analyst with Gartner who specializes in HR technologies, believes HR functions are facing increased pressure from the C-suite to decommission or consolidate technology platforms.

"Our surveys are showing a greater focus by CEOs on cost management," Kostoulas says. "Our 2023 CEO survey saw cost management rise as a priority for those executives by 70 percent."

Kostoulas says the decommissioning or consolidation of systems should start with an enterprisewide inventory of existing platforms. "That might sound basic," he says, "but for many organizations, it can be a challenge to create an inventory of all systems operating at both a global and local level." That's partly because of the number of "shadow" systems operating in companies without authorization from a central body.

Following the inventory, HR leaders should set active targets for streamlining systems if needed. "I've seen organizations that set targets like moving from 150 systems to 50 systems in a three-year time frame," Kostoulas says. That requires tasks such as identifying systems with overlapping functionalities and, for organizations operating internationally, seeing if incumbent technology vendors can cover additional countries with their products.

But decommissioning old systems isn't as easy as flipping an off-switch. Matters such as timing and finding the necessary resources can make the process complicated and costly, as can issues such as a looming company merger, an upcoming busy holiday season or special requirements for when new platforms such as payroll systems must be launched.

"Say a retail organization has a SaaS contract expiring at the end of October or November," says Mark Stelzner, founder and managing principal of IA, an Atlanta-based HR advisory firm. "At that point, they may be in a sort of 'technological freeze,' meaning they can't decommission old systems or recommission new ones because their focus is completely on their customers in the holiday season period or on omnichannel technology deployment. They then need to ask hard questions about negotiating extensions, when to go live and when to decommission platforms. From a strategy and planning perspective, these can be complicated moves." —D.Z.

ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL KORFHAGE FOR *HR MAGAZINE* buyers need to do a better job of linking their technology-purchasing decisions to high-priority business and talent needs.

"One of the loose ends we see is failure to tie talent or business outcomes to HR technology selection and technology road maps," he says. "Very often we see organizations wanting to invest in HR technologies simply because their peers are investing, without seeking to solve a specific business problem in their own companies. Our surveys show many HR leaders have a fear of missing out if they don't invest in emerging technologies like generative AI."

The lack of a cohesive and disciplined approach to technology purchases leads to piecemeal investments in HR technology, Kostoulas says, contributing to SaaS sprawl, disassociated touchpoints in technology ecosystems and other problems.

"The reality is when you have too much fragmentation in your HR technology portfolio, you end up with disjointed solutions that undermine the employee experience and create little business value," he says.

Ben Eubanks, chief research officer with Lighthouse Research, an HR advisory and research firm in Huntsville, Ala., says some organizations seek to cure the problem of technology fragmentation by employing vendors who provide an "overlay" solution on top of aging legacy HR systems. These vendors, two examples being Applaud and Skuid, unify and modernize what can be disjointed systems by providing a new front-end interface without disrupting employee systems of record.

"These tools hook into existing HR tech systems and serve as a front end so employers don't have to leave the providers they're on," Eubanks says.

Experts say issues also can arise when HR hasn't educated itself about the details of vendor contracts or is left out of the loop during technology-buying decisions.

'HR loses credibility by not holding itself accountable and responsible for what it solicits in terms of precious capital from the organization.'

MARK STELZNER

"Sometimes we find HR isn't aware of the terms associated with things like SaaS contract renewals," Stelzner says. "Organizations can be placed in an untenable position when they're not aware of, for example, a requirement that if they don't give 180-day notice, a SaaS contract will simply auto-renew. Before you know it, HR has duplicative systems and finds itself in these continuous year-over-year agreements with vendors."

DATA SECURITY ISSUES

Issues such as unused HR software licenses and legacy technologies that operate only in the background not only create waste and missed opportunities for productivity or efficiency improvements—they can also lead to data security problems. The Productiv study found that 77 percent of IT professionals believe SaaS sprawl is creating new security risks.

The likelihood of such risks rises when technology systems aren't being actively used or managed, Garr says.

"However, it's important to remember that even if you have the most tightly managed process for technology acquisition and decommissioning, you can still have security risks due to what happens outside of your organization," Garr says. "Having a zero-trust security approach is the best way to go, so as to limit security concerns, including for products that are not being actively managed."

CLARIFYING ROLES AND ENSURING ACCOUNTABILITY

Remedying problems with unused licenses, redundant systems and data security is also a matter of ensuring that roles for governing HR technology systems are clear and people are accountable for fulfilling their responsibilities.

"The organization needs to know who is accountable for what and have clear line of sight on it," Stelzner says. "Who is controlling for testing, who is accountable for execution and integration, who oversees change management, who is tracking the vendor community and its new product releases? It's typically a combination of capability and capacity that determines HR technology outcomes."

Ultimately, experts say many HR leaders also have to become more accountable for the projections and promises they make about how HR technology investments will impact the organization.

"Too often there isn't a systematic approach to look back and say, 'Did we actually achieve our ambitions?' " Stelzner says. "HR loses credibility by not holding itself accountable and responsible for what it solicits in terms of precious capital from the organization." HR

Dave Zielinski is a freelance business journalist in Minneapolis.

Q&A

GETTING AHEAD WITHOUT LOSING YOURSELF

Gender equality and organizational culture expert Michelle P. King offers keen insights on navigating the changing dynamics of the workplace.

Reading the company handbook, studying the organizational chart, knowing your job description and understanding your colleagues' roles are all important to career success. But there are many other factors that are just as critical, says Michelle P. King, who holds five degrees, including a Ph.D. in organizations and gender from the Cranfield School of Management in England.

In her latest book, *How Work Works: The Subtle Science of Getting Ahead Without Losing Yourself* (Harper Business, 2023), King explains that excelling in your professional life isn't so much about what you do, but how you manage the process of accomplishing your goals. The book offers keys to navigating the unspoken elements of workplace cultures while also finding meaning in your career. Among King's recommendations are creating informal networks, developing self-awareness and awareness of others, and learning the skills you need to stay relevant.

King is also the founder of the Culture Practice, a diversity consultancy, and a senior advisor to the U.N. Foundation's Girl Up campaign, a girl-centered leadership development initiative. Previously, she was the director of inclusion at Netflix and head of the U.N. Women Global Innovation Coalition for Change. She also authored *The Fix: Overcome the Invisible Barriers That Are Holding Women Back at Work* (Atria Books, 2020).

How did your new book come about?
I wanted to understand why it is that despite having formal policies or processes, certain individuals would get ahead, get promoted, get a pay increase or get the support they needed to advance, and why other people wouldn't. Organizational politics functioned in quite a negative, exclusionary and toxic way. What was fascinating was understanding what got us to this point and how the world of work is changing. Everything is context-specific.

We now live in a digital world, and that has fundamentally altered how we work together. The rules of white men were largely in place in most workplaces. That will continue to change, and that's good. I wanted to give people an insight into how the world is changing and what you need to navigate it.

Simple example: You made a mistake. Vulnerability is going to your leader and saying, "I'm sorry, I made a mistake." Leading with vulnerability is, "I'm sorry, but here is what I learned, and here are the steps that I'm going to take to make sure that this mistake does not happen again in the future."

Does the change mean the end of the unwritten rules that helped some people get ahead?
Back in the 1950s and [in] the industrial era, a lot of people could just go to work, do their job on repeat and leave. Today, that's not the case. Eighty-three percent of us need to work with others to do our job. Knowing how to bridge our differences with others and knowing how to manage our interactions with other people is really important. I think a lot of those unwritten rules were about how to get ahead, and that often came at a cost to other people. That's changing precisely because we have to work with other people to do our jobs.

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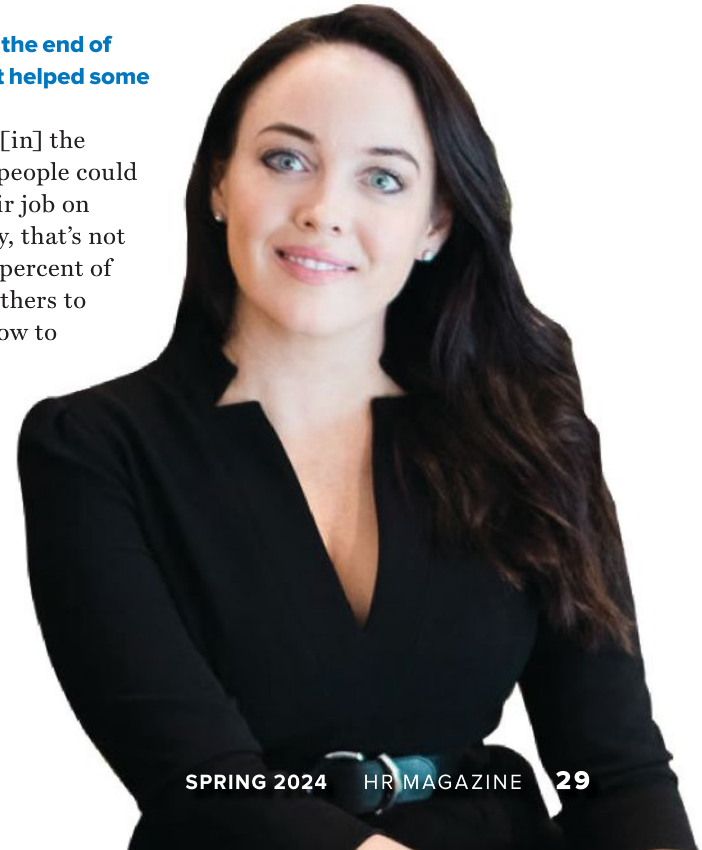

How do you build the informal network necessary to get ahead?

Don't wait until you need something from somebody to connect with them. Think about people you want to connect with and how you can offer them information, advice or support. You can provide that before you need anything from people. The goal is to invest upfront. You're not only going to feel more connected to the people you work with and have a greater sense of belonging, but you're also going to get all the benefits that come from having a broader, diverse network. So, really think about the importance of investing upfront, and for a lot of people, that's quite counterintuitive.

How can you tell who should be in your network?

Studies quoted in the book show that having a diverse network is highly predictive of your ability to get promoted, access job opportunities and have long-term career success. The world of work will increasingly become more diverse, so you cannot afford to just network with people who look like you.

You have limited time and energy, and you cannot connect with everybody. Networks should be about 18 people. Be very conscious of where you're spending your time and who you're investing in. Make sure it's a mutually beneficial relationship, because if it isn't, or you're unsure, that's not a connection that's going to be worth it. I think [that] very quickly, you'll start to see through behaviors and whether or not they are beneficial.

> 'The world of work will increasingly become more diverse, so you cannot afford to just network with people who look like you.'

Why are companies struggling with inclusion when our collective workforces are continuing to become more diverse?

Most people don't know how to practice inclusion every day as part of their job. Employees' experiences of inclusion are directly attributable to their line leader.

A lot of managers are still managing in that 1950s, transactional, command-and-control way. That's not effective today. You need leaders who can build cultures of trust.

Leaders today can't be transactional. They need to be much more transformational, which means being democratic, caring, empathetic, being a leader who can have hard conversations, give and receive feedback, coach people, delegate, all of those skills.

A lot of companies, when it comes to performance measures or how they hire or develop people, focus on "the what" at the expense of "the how": What qualifications do you have and what experience do you have, rather than how have you demonstrated behaviors that are aligned to our standards?

> 'The meaning you derive from work is directly through the connections you have to the people you work with.'

Can you teach people to develop social and emotional skills such as becoming empathetic?

A self-aware person understands their behavior, thoughts and feelings, and how other people perceive them, so that they can manage the impact their behavior is having. The challenge is: How do you build self-awareness, given that it's something every single one of us struggles with?

There are two ways. The first is through self-reflection. Take 10 minutes a day for 10 days and ask questions like, "What could I do differently? What worked? What didn't?" The second way is informal feedback. Often, we make feedback weird by formalizing it, and people end up crying and uncomfortable. When you do a presentation or have a team meeting and you're leaving the room, informally ask someone [about your performance]: "What worked? What could I have done differently?"

How do you derive meaning at work?

You can't rely on your workplace to do this for you, because most of us are going to hold down many jobs with many different types of companies. I think the goal is to think about how you build meaning in the performance itself. The meaning you derive from work is directly through the connections you have to the people you work with. That's the meaning you're going to take away with you every single day. HR

Interview by Theresa Agovino, workplace editor for SHRM.

SHOULD EMPLOYERS MONITOR EMPLOYEES' MESSAGES?

Monitoring can be essential to maintaining a safe and productive workplace.

By Caroline Collins, SHRM-CP

YES

Digital communications have transformed work. Email, instant messaging and social media platforms have become integral tools for workplace collaboration and communication. However, this interconnectedness also raises concerns about the potential for monitoring messages and employee privacy. For employers, it requires a balancing act.

Monitoring can be essential for maintaining a strong work environment, protecting sensitive information and ensuring compliance with legal requirements. The practice can help employers maintain a productive and safe work environment by identifying and addressing issues such as harassment, discrimination or other inappropriate conduct and protecting employees from harm.

Monitoring can also serve to safeguard sensitive and confidential information, including employee records, customer data, financial information and trade secrets. Monitoring employee communications can help prevent data breaches, leaks of proprietary information or the inadvertent sharing of sensitive data.

In some industries, there are legal and regulatory obligations that require organizations to monitor and retain certain communications. For example, financial services companies are subject to strict regulations from the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission and U.S. Department of Justice regarding the retention of electronic communications. Monitoring can help companies remain compliant with these requirements.

Monitoring can also help prevent the misuse of company resources. Employees sometimes use messaging systems for personal purposes, such as chatting with friends or family, shopping online, or browsing social media. Excessive personal use of company resources can decrease productivity and even be a security risk. Monitoring can deter employees from misusing company resources and help identify and address potential problems.

It's important to monitor employee messaging systems in a way that respects employee privacy rights. Employers should establish clear policies on monitoring and communicate them effectively to employees. Employee handbooks are an ideal tool to help ensure that employees are aware of the company's stance on monitoring and what to expect.

Employers also need to comply with common-law protections against invasion of privacy and the federal Electronic Communications Privacy Act, which is the only federal law that directly governs the monitoring of electronic communications in the workplace. *(For guidance, see SHRM's toolkit on Managing Workplace Monitoring and Surveillance: shrm.org/workplace-privacy-toolkit.)*

It's also essential for companies to be transparent about their monitoring practices—the purposes behind them—and the steps taken to protect employee privacy when conducting monitoring. This transparency can help build trust within the organization and show that monitoring is not about invading privacy but about protecting the business and its employees.

Ultimately, the decision of whether to monitor employee messaging systems is complex and must be made on a case-by-case basis. When done responsibly, and with the right intentions, monitoring can be a valuable tool for businesses. However, it's important to balance the company's interests with employee privacy.

By establishing clear policies, being transparent about monitoring practices and respecting employee privacy rights, companies can strike that balance.

Caroline Collins, SHRM-CP, is director of human resources at the Marwin Company, a building products manufacturer based in Columbia, S.C.

When employers monitor communication channels, they can cut off the free flow of information.

By Eric Mochnacz, SHRM-SCP

NO

Companies will have no reason to actively monitor employee communications when HR takes the appropriate steps. In taking this position, I assume that HR has made it clear to employees (as any experienced HR professional would) that there is no reasonable expectation of privacy on employer-owned and managed communication channels. HR also needs to clearly articulate the organization's acceptable-use policies regarding equipment and messaging. Additionally, employees need to understand that anti-harassment and anti-discrimination policies apply to in-person interactions *and* digital communications.

With these guidelines in place, employees generally know that their digital discussions should be appropriate and in alignment with company policies—if you wouldn't say it in front of the CEO, don't post it on Slack. Additionally, workers should know that any type of digital communication is discoverable, so it's best to engage only in appropriate, professional discussions via email, Slack or other digital communication tools.

Employers need to make these expectations, guidelines and policies clear during onboarding and in employee handbooks. They also need to address violations appropriately and in a way that will encourage behavior change. That will ensure employees feel empowered to report inappropriate language or behavior.

The idea that employers—and by extension, HR—need to constantly monitor employee messages comes from a lack of trust. Regularly looking at employee emails and Slack messages to ensure compliance with company policies is detrimental to establishing trust. And can HR and managers really get valuable insights about conversations through these channels if employees know they're being watched?

Building trust among your workforce is essential to retaining that workforce. Employees want to know their employer trusts them. That trust immediately erodes if they feel they can't speak openly on employee communication channels.

Imagine a scenario where an employee makes a mistake and reaches out to a colleague to help remedy it. If the employee's manager is monitoring the chat and immediately steps in, the employee may perceive that the company doesn't trust them to handle problems without a supervisor's help. And because their chat was being monitored and a supervisor intervened, that employee will now forever be hesitant to DM a colleague for an assist.

Your employer brand is how your current, former and potential employees talk about you. Do you really want to be known as the HR department that sneakily monitors all company messaging channels? It's hard to attract good talent when one of the first things a job seeker sees on Glassdoor is that the employer doesn't trust its employees and that their Slack and email are constantly monitored.

If it is standard practice for your company to regularly monitor private email or messaging communications, and employees know it, you risk that they won't engage on these platforms about work-related issues because they're afraid that someone will potentially use their messages against them. In turn, managers will learn nothing about what's going on with the workforce because their people will be hesitant to share information about themselves or what's happening in the office.

With monitoring, employers potentially cut off that flow. Monitoring employee communications yields distrust, and distrust is never a great foundation for a strong culture. HR

Eric Mochnacz, SHRM-SCP, is director of operations and a senior consultant at Red Clover, an HR consulting firm based in Kinnelon, N.J.

AI + HI

Revolutionary technology is changing the HR game. Does your workforce have the **human intelligence** to make it pay off?

By Dave Zielinski

Photo illustration by C.J. Burton

= ROI

When employees in the talent development group at consulting firm Booz Allen Hamilton began using generative AI (GenAI) tools in their work, they weren't left to their own devices to learn how to master the technology. Learning and development practitioners in the group, who use GenAI for tasks such as creating training videos and summarizing notes from staff meetings, first had to complete their own comprehensive instruction and have use of the technology approved before applying GenAI on the job.

"Using GenAI has reduced our content production time by hundreds of hours as well as brought down production costs," says Jim Hemgen, director of talent development for Booz Allen Hamilton. "But everyone who uses GenAI first has to [be] approved and certified to use it by completing internal training programs."

The company's multitiered AI Ready training initiative includes courses designed to teach all of its 33,000 employees the basics of using GenAI, as well as more in-depth, custom content for specific roles such as engineers and consultants. Baked into all of these courses is a focus on the responsible and ethical use of the tool, covering topics such as preventing the introduction of bias, ensuring the accuracy of GenAI outputs and avoiding the use of confidential company data in models.

"Our goal is AI readiness, which means ensuring everyone in our workforce is conversant in understanding GenAI's capabilities, which includes using GenAI ethically and safely," Hemgen says.

A DAUNTING TRAINING CHALLENGE

The meteoric rise of GenAI has created a vast need for reskilling across job roles and industries that has challenged HR and learning leaders to respond with agile training strategies that can keep pace with the rapidly evolving technology.

Many organizations have moved from merely dabbling in tools such as OpenAI's ChatGPT, Google's Bard and Microsoft Bing Chat to widespread workplace adoption. GenAI tools are being used in technical roles such as software development but also in jobs within HR, marketing and customer service departments. In response, organi-

CASE STUDY: HOW ONE COMPANY TAUGHT ITS WORKFORCE GENERATIVE AI SKILLS

Employees were encouraged to fail fast and quickly apply the lessons learned.

When leaders at Mineral, an organization that provides compliance and HR guidance to small and midsize businesses, approved the use of the generative AI (GenAI) tool ChatGPT to support the company's client services, they knew they'd have to quickly equip their workers with the skills needed to use the technology effectively and responsibly.

Rather than relying on external e-learning courses that can quickly become out-of-date, Mineral's training strategy revolved around creating small communities of learning that the company called "pods." This allowed employees to experiment with ChatGPT in trial-and-error fashion under the guidance of experienced peers and instructors well versed in the technology.

Susan Anderson, SHRM-SCP, chief services officer for Mineral, says the company also made a concerted effort early in the process to train managers zations have had to teach employees not only how to master quickly changing GenAI applications, but also how to use the technology responsibly and ethically.

Large swaths of the workforce stand to be impacted by GenAI—incrementally at first, but in wholesale fashion soon after. The reality is that many workers have yet to receive any substantive training in how the technology works, how it will change the way they perform their jobs and how to mitigate the still-significant risks of its use in the workplace.

Experts say that many roles will be transformed by GenAI. For example, employees in traditional customer service jobs may find that they spend more time overseeing chatbots or automated processes than interacting with clients.

A 2023 international survey by the Boston Consulting Group found that while 86 percent of workers believed they would need training in AI, only 14 percent of front-line employees reported receiving any upskilling training to date. Similarly, another study conducted last year by Randstad's Workmonitor Pulse found that only 1 in 10 workers had been offered any AI-specific training, despite a 2,000 percent growth in job postings requiring AI skills.

14%

of front-line workers reported receiving any AI upskilling.

Source: Boston Consulting Group, 2023.

The GenAI skills gap is causing restless nights for CEOs, CHROs and chief learning officers. In a 2023 survey of HR leaders by TalentLMS, a learning management system provider in San Francisco, 64 percent said the rise of generative AI has changed the key in-demand skills needed in their organizations. More than half say AI literacy is a new must-have skill for employees in all roles.

in the use of GenAI. "We wanted those managers to fully understand both the opportunities and risks of generative AI so they would be prepared to lead their teams through change," she says.

Employees on the services team were encouraged to sign up for free ChatGPT accounts and start experimenting with the tool. They later were broken out into learning pods of four to begin using ChatGPT for a variety of training tasks, some work-related and others nonwork-related.

One pod, for example, chose to use prompts to summarize key points from large bodies of text. An employee in another pod chose to learn ChatGPT by asking it to explain how wormholes work. Another used it to build a sample Thanksgiving meal menu.

"It's a hands-on, lab-type approach," Anderson says. "It's not uncommon for more experienced team members we call 'explorers' to share their screens while working with generative AI in a training exercise, answering questions from peers. It's all about structured experimentation with ChatGPT to help demystify the tool and teach best practices. We encourage our people to 'fail fast' and quickly apply those lessons learned to improve their skill in using generative AI."

The training also includes use of a "red-yellow-green" scale that teaches employees appropriate and responsible use of the technology, Anderson says.

"We talk about what are and are not appropriate uses of ChatGPT in our environment," she adds. "We identify sample use cases where we believe generative AI can help us deliver more effective and efficient service to clients and where it may not. That proved comforting to some employees who had trepidations about using the technology."

The client services team also was taught how to write effective prompts, which are the instructions that guide GenAI to produce accurate and relevant responses. Workers studied this six-step prompting framework:

1. Establish the persona you want your GenAI tool to emulate.
2. List the task it needs to complete.
3. Provide context for the task.
4. Tell the tool who the audience is, if applicable.
5. Describe the goal of the output.
6. Give the tool a description of how the output should be formatted.

Mineral also holds twice-weekly discussions on a company Slack channel about employees' experiences using ChatGPT.

"These are intentionally open conversations on Tuesdays and Thursdays to find out what's working for employees," Anderson says, "where they're encountering obstacles, to answer questions and to celebrate success." —D.Z.

Training in GenAI has also emerged as a key perk in attracting job candidates and retaining top employees. "If you're a company that has innovation as part of its talent brand, and you're trying to attract job candidates who want to continuously build their digital skills, promising them training in GenAI should be a no-brainer," says Allison Horn, executive director of talent and organization strategy for consulting firm Accenture and a former HR executive with that company. "The same goes for making GenAI training available to existing employees as a retention tool."

CREATING LEARNING STRATEGIES

Organizations that are meeting the challenge of training their workforces in the use of GenAI often rely on a handful of best practices. Most understand the importance of using companywide literacy training as a first step to demystify the technology and reduce the "fear factor" of potential job loss to GenAI tools. Learning experts say these companies also are careful to calibrate the right mix of external and internal learning content so they can scale training while at the same time maintaining some agility to keep pace with the rapidly changing technology.

Best practices also include dedicating considerable time to teaching the responsible and ethical use of GenAI. Problems such as the technology "hallucinating" nonsensical content or simply providing inaccurate responses will diminish as the capabilities of large language models (LLMs) such as ChatGPT improve with new product releases and as more organizations create their own custom versions of LLMs. Still, the technology has flaws and there remain risks, including employees inadvertently entering confidential company data into GenAI tools.

Given that the arrival of GenAI will leave few jobs untouched, learning experts say training initiatives should start with companywide "fluency" education that includes both conversations and formal courses that cover what the technology is, how it works, and where its strengths and limitations lie.

"Ideally, it starts with senior leaders and change agents in the organization, those with influence and knowledge, talking either in person or through use of short videos about why GenAI is important and what it can do both for jobs and the organization," Horn says.

This awareness training should address the trepidation many employees still have about GenAI to get them in the right mindset to learn.

"It's important to help people get over the very natural 'threat response' they have when introduced to new technologies," Horn says. "This is especially true with GenAI, because it's had a more immediate impact on people's work and personal lives than other new technologies introduced in recent years."

Horn says this training can be more effective if real-world examples are used to show workers how GenAI can amplify what they like best about their jobs and reduce the time they have to spend on more mundane or repetitive tasks.

Evelyn McMullen, a research manager specializing in talent management and employee experience with Nucleus Research, believes a lack of clarity and understanding is a significant barrier to building GenAI capabilities in an organization. "HR teams must improve employee training, not just on how to use GenAI, but to address the risks and apprehension many user bases face," she says.

'GenAI is becoming the new benchmark for tech skills in the workplace, including for nontechnical roles.'

STEPHANIE STAPLETON SUDBURY

64%

of HR leaders believe that the rise of generative AI has changed the key in-demand skills needed in their organizations.

Source: TalentLMS, 2023.

A TIERED LEARNING APPROACH

Before launching additional stages of learning, experts say it's critical for leaders and employees to first identify and segment job tasks where GenAI can have the biggest impact and where it may not be as helpful. That includes identifying tasks that might be fully automated without human assistance. Company leaders can then build learning plans around those tasks for which GenAI will augment human skills.

A new report from SHRM and The Burning Glass Institute, titled *Generative Artificial Intelligence and the Workforce*, found that it will become increasingly important for leaders to evaluate the composition of their workforces and determine how exposed specific jobs are to disruptions from GenAI. For those roles most impacted, the study found that reskilling and upskilling will be essential as GenAI grows more central to business operations.

"In this dynamic landscape, blending in-house training with strategic external hiring will be pivotal to harness the full potential of GenAI innovations," the study authors wrote. They also found that as AI disrupts more traditional job roles, the importance of such uniquely human attributes as critical thinking, empathy and adaptability will become even more pronounced in parallel.

A tiered learning approach customizes training to the specific needs of different job types. Technical positions such as software developers, data scientists and cybersecurity experts require one type of GenAI training

AN OVERLOOKED POPULATION: PREPARING FRONT-LINE WORKERS FOR AI'S IMPACT

Many blue-collar jobs will be augmented with the use of the new technology.

One segment of the workforce that stands to be significantly impacted by the growing use of generative AI (GenAI) is also a group that receives the least amount of training in using the technology.

Front-line workers constitute about 70 percent of the U.S. workforce, yet most AI-related training is currently geared toward other employee populations, such as executives, engineers and data scientists. A 2023 study from the Boston Consulting Group found that only 14 percent of front-line workers said they had received any AI-related upskilling to date, compared with 44 percent of leaders. The survey involved 12,800 employees across industries in 18 countries.

A new training initiative from Guild, an education company, aims to address the problem of AI fluency among front-line workers. It's offering 40 training programs targeted to that audience from universities including Cornell, Louisiana State, Maryland, Wilmington and Southern New Hampshire.

Bijal Shah, interim CEO at Guild, says the program was launched when Guild's research discovered a dearth of relevant training options for front-line workers and early-career to midcareer roles in the marketplace.

"We felt it was important to help individuals in front-line and lower-wage job roles get a better understanding of how AI works and how their jobs will be impacted by automation in the future," Shah says. "Many front-line jobs aren't going away as a result of AI, they're just going to be augmented with use of the technology, so ensuring people have an opportunity to learn generative AI skills is important."

The training initiative is designed in four bundles:

- An *AI Fundamentals* course that builds awareness of the technology and how it works and teaches responsible and ethical use.
- *AI in Practice* content-focused courses on how to apply the technology to common work tasks.
- *AI Expertise* courses geared toward technical jobs, with instruction in areas such as creating AI applications and algorithms.
- *AI for Leaders*, which is the only bundle targeted to workers who are not on the front line and teaches best practices for designing and enabling an AI-driven strategy across organizations.

Guild isn't the only organization striving to create greater AI literacy. In 2023, Amazon launched a free training program dubbed "AI Ready" with the goal of training 2 million people around the world in GenAI skills by 2025. The program includes eight free courses for beginners, and experts in both technical and tech-adjacent job roles and will be available to everyone, not just Amazon employees, according to a company spokesperson.

Microsoft and LinkedIn also joined forces last year to offer a free AI skills training and certification program on LinkedIn's platform. The initiative is designed to teach workers around the globe how to be fluent in AI, how to use GenAI to boost productivity and efficiency, and how to use the technology responsibly and ethically. The two organizations said the coursework will be unlocked and available for free through 2025. —D.Z.

'Ensuring safe and responsible use is a big topic in many of the learning communities we've seen organizations set up around generative AI.'

BRYAN ACKERMANN

related to building applications or integrating AI into back-end systems, for example. HR, recruiting and learning professionals require different approaches tailored to performing specific tasks with GenAI, such as writing job descriptions, creating engagement surveys or building training modules.

Experts say a common thread running through training for all job types should be teaching effective "prompt engineering," which refers to crafting good instructions to guide GenAI to the most useful and relevant responses. This is the modern-day version of "garbage in, garbage out"—the quality of prompts determines the quality of answers.

"It's teaching the art of asking good questions," Horn says. "Employees need to know how to tune their prompts to receive the best answers back from GenAI tools. Training should show examples of bad prompts, average prompts and excellent prompts to show the different results all three will yield."

Some organizations also have found value in creating "prompt libraries," a collection of best-practice prompts that have been used with success for specific tasks or projects. Employees can customize these prompt templates for their own unique needs.

THE RIGHT MIX OF CONTENT

For company leaders, a key decision is whether to use externally or internally developed resources for GenAI training. Experts say e-learning courses from third-party providers can play an important role, but they also have limitations, such as becoming outdated as GenAI tools change.

"If the GenAI learning content you need already exists externally, there's little reason to re-create it internally," Horn says. "Companies should leverage external content as an accelerator to get people up to speed and then build their custom learning layers on top of that to address company- or industry-specific needs."

Some organizations create GenAI boot camps where they contract with local universities to create custom programs for their workers. Others tap into the vast amount of GenAI learning resources now available from third-party providers, many of whom have seen a surge of interest in their offerings.

Udemy is one of those providers. Stephanie Stapleton Sudbury, president of Udemy Business, says courses on the platform related to ChatGPT grew by 4,400 percent in the past year, as measured by learning hours. That makes it among the most in-demand content on the platform. Udemy now offers more than 1,600 courses tied to ChatGPT and prompt engineering in multiple languages, with almost 3 million enrollments, she says.

"GenAI is becoming the new benchmark for tech skills in the workplace, including for nontechnical roles," Sudbury says. "The demand we're seeing on our platform reflects that."

The course-publishing model Udemy uses, which relies on instructors who also are technology practitioners to create and publish courses to the platform, keeps content timely, she says. And demand for GenAI learning courses isn't coming just from people in technical jobs. Some popular Udemy GenAI courses include "Discover, validate and launch new business ideas with ChatGPT," "ChatGPT marketing: Creating complete campaigns with ChatGPT" and "Generative AI: From big picture to idea to implementation."

Other third-party content providers are experiencing a similar explosion of interest in GenAI-related courses. Learning vendor edX now offers more than 500 AI-related courses, including content tailored to specific industries such as education, health care and technology.

"These are clear indicators of the growing appetite for AI knowledge in organizations," says Andy Morgan, executive vice president and head of edX Enterprise.

KEEPING PACE WITH RAPIDLY CHANGING TECHNOLOGY

Efforts to equip workers with the skills to use GenAI are complicated by the fact that the technology is a moving target and learning content often has a limited shelf life. Creators of GenAI tools regularly release new features, and the technology is evolving quickly.

For example, when ChatGPT was first introduced in November 2022, it was still a text-only tool that routinely produced hallucinations and inaccuracies. It could only answer user questions based on data up to September 2021. Today, most GenAI applications are multimodal,

with the ability, for example, to conduct searches using photos and respond to voice commands. They can also understand context and nuance better, and tools such as ChatGPT-4 are now trained on information up to fall 2023 or later.

Keeping pace with such a fast-moving technology requires agile approaches to instruction that can be easily updated and modified.

Bryan Ackermann, head of AI strategy and transformation for management consulting firm Korn Ferry, says that using strategies such as creating "communities of learning" can help organizations stay more responsive to changes than relying on tools such as e-learning courses.

"E-learning can quickly grow outdated because of the lead time usually needed for content and course production," Ackermann says. "By the time these courses get to end users, the GenAI tools have changed again. So, you end up seeing a lot of generic content that's trying to be relevant despite the evolution of the technology."

Ackermann says the most effective training methods he has seen involve creating learning communities that encourage employees to experiment with the latest versions of GenAI tools and learn best practices from internal subject matter experts or experienced peers.

"These communities are given different LLM tools to use, along with the appropriate guidelines and policies about how to use the technology safely and responsibly in an enterprise context," he says. "The focus is on helping people learn via trial and error, including using supporting resources like libraries of best-practice prompts employees can learn from or customize."

Organizations including LinkedIn, Harvard University, Meta and Walmart have created generative AI "playgrounds" to help employees learn about and master the technology. Playgrounds contain software, domain-specific data and policies that encourage technical as well as nontechnical workers to experiment with GenAI in a safe space. This arrangement avoids some of the risks involved when using external computer servers, such as leaking proprietary company data or violating copyright law.

TEACHING RESPONSIBLE, SAFE USE

Among the biggest fears of top executives when GenAI tools first became available was that workers would get their companies in legal hot water with copyright violations or would inadvertently leak confidential data when using the applications.

While these concerns remain, more senior leaders have calculated that the benefits of GenAI outweigh its risks.

LEARN HOW TO MAXIMIZE AI AND HUMAN INTELLIGENCE AT SHRM.ORG/AI-IN-THE-WORKPLACE

70%

of business leaders in the U.S., U.K. and Australia said they don't believe their teams have the skills to 'safely' use generative AI.

Source: Salesforce, 2023.

As a result, they are creating more rigorous GenAI governance structures and encouraging their chief learning officers to double down on using employee training to help protect against such potential problems.

In a 2024 workplace forecast, analysts from Gartner said organizations must continue to actively manage the risks of GenAI. That includes creating more rigorous access and file classification policies, as well as improving quality control and judgment when using the outputs of GenAI tools.

Many rank-and-file employees also recognize the risks of using the technology irresponsibly. A 2023 study by Salesforce found that 62 percent of desk workers said they don't have the skills to "safely and effectively" use GenAI, and 70 percent of business leaders said they didn't believe their teams had the skills to "safely" use the technology. The study surveyed more than 4,000 workers in the U.S., U.K. and Australia.

"Ensuring safe and responsible use is a big topic in many of the learning communities we've seen organizations set up around generative AI," Ackermann says.

As the technology continues to improve, experts say it will remain important to teach employees to stay vigilant in evaluating GenAI's outputs. A recent study detailed in *The Wall Street Journal* found that employees who work on tasks alongside machines tend to pay less attention to detail and miss more errors than if they worked alone.

"Answers you receive from GenAI have a confident, authoritative tone, and that will only increase with time," Horn says. "Human experts will still need to decide where content produced by GenAI is reliable and accurate and where it might be more shaky. It's important not to take GenAI's output as gospel, even as the technology innovates and gets better and better." HR

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eps to Keep Pay Up-to-Date

Companies can act to improve their footing in a shifting compensation landscape.

By Joanne Sammer

These are interesting times when it comes to compensation. The trends that have been driving changes to pay systems—and, in some cases, knocking pay levels out of alignment with historical trends and organizational budgets—show no signs of easing.

Competition for talent? Check.

Wage pressures? Check.

More pay transparency laws? Check.

Pay equity questions? Check.

All these issues are jostling for attention among normal business priorities. How well a company manages the situation will have a significant impact on its competitiveness as a business and as an employer.

These six steps can help HR leaders as they move ahead on this journey into a rapidly evolving future of compensation.

‘It’s more than market pressure. We’re all looking to create a more engaged workforce, which adds long-term value.’

GWEN GOLLMER

Step 1

READ THE MARKET AND ‘SHOW UP’

Employers that read the marketplace for talent accurately based on their own needs are taking steps to adjust compensation accordingly. Ally Financial, for example, has revamped its approach to compensation for its customer service workers to reflect their importance to the organization. The finance company now offers a minimum wage of $23 per hour for these jobs—a level of pay that’s designed to establish the company as a market leader, according to Gwen Gollmer, executive director of total rewards.

By combining hourly wage with a stock grant of 100 shares per year, the company wants to recognize the importance and complexity of the work employees do on behalf of customers and encourage them to think like owners of the firm.

“It’s more than market pressure,” Gollmer says. “We’re all looking to create a more engaged workforce, which adds long-term value.”

Forced to confront the ongoing realities of a tight talent market and the related employee expectations of higher compensation, organizations are trying to figure out how to stay on top of wage concerns. But no matter what employers decide to do, these pressing issues with compensation won’t be going away anytime soon.

Employee compensation is both a cost that businesses must manage and an investment they must maximize. If employers are struggling to define the future of compensation, Gollmer urges them “to consider what they [currently] offer and how they show up for employees.”

This is an important question because it’s easy for the balance between the needs and wants of employees and employers to become skewed.

“Focusing on the bottom line at the expense of the employee experience can actually hurt that bottom line,” says Mariann Madden, director of work and rewards with consultancy WTW. At some point in the past, “organizations created pay systems that worked, but they don’t always consider whether those systems still work.”

Consider pay for hourly workers. Offering a competitive wage is essential to attracting and retaining hourly workers in the current environment. But money takes an employer only so far. This is where “showing up” comes in.

Hourly workers care about how much they make, of course. But they also care very much about how and when they earn that money.

“Work hours and scheduling are part of the employee experience,” Madden explains. If employees don’t feel they can control that, she says, it could undermine any return from offering higher pay levels.

In other situations, an outdated or ineffective pay strategy may be blurring employees’ line of sight between their efforts and their pay.

“From the perspective of the employee, why should they work harder? How is productivity rewarded? How do they move up the pay range? How do employees get considered for promotion?” asks Lexi Clarke, chief people officer for PayScale, which provides compensation data. “All of this goes back to your pay strategy.”

Step 2

KEEP SYSTEMS FLEXIBLE ENOUGH TO ACCOMMODATE CHANGE

Getting pay wrong can also cost employers access to a high-quality and more diverse talent pool.

“Do the basics well, and that will take care of a lot of issues,” says Taylor Bradley, head of HR business partners and compensation at AI firm Turing.com. For example, a strong and current compensation philosophy and clear pay ranges can serve as an essential firewall against pay inequities.

It’s also important to remember that compensation needs to evolve to keep up as organizational goals change. This means making sure that pay structures, philosophy and practices can handle any future changes.

“You need to have your ducks in a row no matter what the change is,” says Paaras Parker, CHRO at Paycor, an HR software company.

For example, Patrick Mulvey, director of talent acquisition for mattress retailer Saatva, sees the need for pay programs that not only are realistic and reportable but also have more-structured pay ranges.

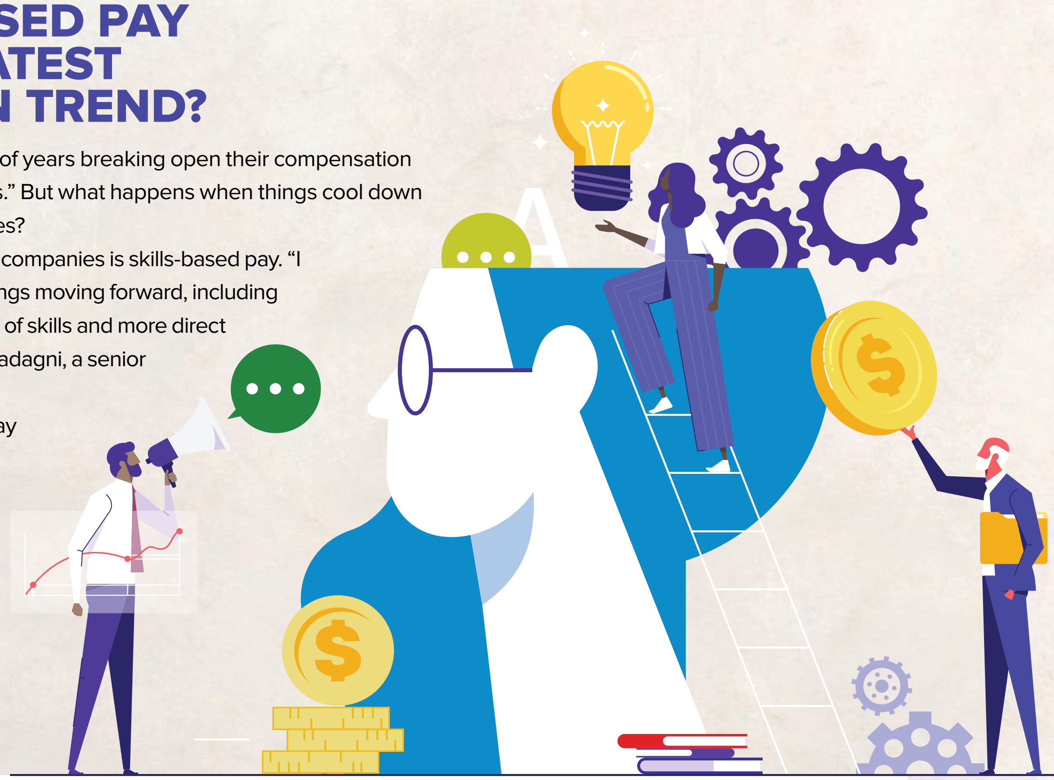
“While most large companies have had highly structured ranges, that was [not always] the case with small and midsized companies,” he says.

WILL SKILLS-BASED PAY BECOME THE LATEST COMPENSATION TREND?

Employers have spent the past couple of years breaking open their compensation budgets to pay for talent with "hot skills." But what happens when things cool down and the next wave of new skills emerges?

The answer for a growing number of companies is skills-based pay. "I think we're going to see a number of things moving forward, including greater focus on skills, better evaluation of skills and more direct payment for critical skills," says Tony Guadagni, a senior principal with consulting firm Gartner.

The development of systems and pay structures to support skills-based pay is still underway. For example, there may not yet be enough skills-specific compensation data to accurately price in-demand skills. However, many companies have already started down this road. Here's how the first steps to greater use of skills-based pay are emerging.



Research shows skills-based pay is a budding movement, with 18% of organizations currently using skills-based pay and 15% planning to use it within the next 12 months.

Source: Skills Pulse Survey, Salary.com, 2023.

Organizations are using skills-based pay with four key goals in mind:

1. Revamp key technical skill sets.
2. Support new market entry.
3. Develop new services and products that require certain technical skills.
4. Strategically hire high-end professionals with skills in areas such as digital intelligence and artificial intelligence.

Source: *The Skills Revolution Is Now,* Mercer, 2023.

Employers are looking for ways to compensate employees who have critical, hard-to-find skills by:

- Providing a bonus to the employee with the skill, either once or periodically while the skill remains competitive (**50%**).
- Applying a premium to base pay (**43%**).
- Using a higher target percentile (**41%**).

Source: *2023 Compensation Best Practices Report,* PayScale.

Employers are already using some form of skills-based pay, but they can do more.

- Only **26%** of employers describe their methodology to determine appropriate compensation as rigorous.
- **48%** call it basic.

Source: *2023 Compensation Best Practices Report,* PayScale.

There are signs that skills-based pay will be welcomed:

- **80%** of workers and **76%** of business executives say that tying hiring, pay, promotions, succession and deployment to people's skills—rather than their job history, tenure in the job, or network—would reduce bias and improve fairness.
- **73%** of workers say skills-based pay would improve their work experience.
- **66%** of workers say they would gravitate to organizations that emphasize skills rather than specific jobs or degrees.

Source: *Building Tomorrow's Skills-Based Organization,* Deloitte, 2022.

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Customization has also become a watchword for talent, even when it comes to compensation. If an employer is trying to hire someone with an in-demand skill set, will the organization be able to accommodate a candidate who wants to work a four-day workweek instead of the traditional five days?

"A lot of employees are willing to make trade-offs for a better work/life balance," says Kyle Holm, vice president of compensation advisory at Sequoia Consulting Group.

Employers need to figure out how to fit these people and others with needed knowledge and capabilities into the compensation structure by building programs that are broader and more flexible than traditional compensation systems, Holm says.

This flexibility is likely to be particularly important to individuals with emerging skills in artificial intelligence and other new technologies. In this environment, "cash must be competitive, but flexibility is key," Bradley says.

Step 3

BRACE YOURSELF FOR THE IMPACT OF GROWING PAY TRANSPARENCY

The impact of pay transparency laws is already being felt. SHRM's research shows that the inclusion of salary information in a job posting makes 82 percent of candidates more likely to consider applying. Conversely, a lack of this information discourages 74 percent of potential candidates.

For their part, employers say that providing pay-range information upfront has led to more (70 percent) and better (66 percent) applicants for these roles.

Longer term, the impact of pay transparency is likely to ripple through employers' entire compensation systems, regardless of whether a specific organization is subject to pay transparency laws.

For example, "external and internal candidates can easily come with detailed information on the pricing of a specific role" gleaned from job postings inside and outside of the organization, Mulvey explains. As a result, instead of "giving a standard X-percentage increase with a promotion, employers will need to tie promotions to the appropriate level of the new role," while external candidates will also come armed with hard data when negotiating pay, he says.

Smart employers are looking for ways to incorporate these changes into their overall value proposition for talent. Firms paying closer to the midpoint of market rates will have to become more effective in communicating nonsalary benefits—including remote work, perks and incentives, and paid time off—to remain competitive.

"While larger companies and specific industries, like financial services, have a competitive advantage in recruiting because they often pay well above the midpoint," the push to bring employees back to the office on a full-time or hybrid basis may erode that advantage, Mulvey says.

The greater flexibility of smaller, more nimble organizations to remain remote could provide those organizations with more of an advantage among workers who value the flexibility.

ANTON VIERIETIN / ISTOCK

‘Why is a company only doing what’s required, and why doesn’t it disclose all pay information? These are fair questions.’

TAUSEEF RAHMAN

Step 4

BE READY TO TELL YOUR COMPENSATION STORY

As more compensation information and data become readily available to anyone who looks for it, HR will need to get out in front of this information flow. Does the employer’s salary data stand up to scrutiny? If HR doesn’t know or isn’t sure, they should take steps to root out any pay discrepancies and disparities based on gender, race and other irrelevant factors while also ensuring long-tenured employees are being paid market rates.

Rebecca Shipley, total rewards practice leader with Brown & Brown Insurance, urges employers to spend time planning what they want to do and what they want to be in terms of pay, then get ready for change. “It’s important to have the right structure and feel good about your data,” she says. This can include ensuring the integrity of data, conducting a pay equity analysis, making sure jobs are market-priced correctly and confirming allowable ways to differentiate pay between employees.

Without this type of analysis, “employers may not have the structure to defend pay decisions, or they might have some inconsistencies to explain,” says Tauseef Rahman, career practice growth leader with consulting firm Mercer. Therefore, Rahman suggests that employers allow three or four months to conduct training, validate compensation data and prepare to defend pay decisions when necessary.

These efforts also give employers time to develop a narrative for pay discussions and disclosures. “I think we will see companies wanting to control the salary narrative,” Mulvey says.

In his view, public pay ranges can nurture more straightforward wage discussions that can help simplify salary negotiation for many roles. “Because of our confidence in our salary structure, we have been comfortable in posting our ranges for positions,” he says.

Ally Financial has stopped asking about candidates’ pay histories regardless of location and is now monitoring the impact of this decision.

“Every regulatory change or emerging trend presents an opportunity,” Gollmer says. “We need to invest the time to fully understand what [a trend] means for us” and how it fits into the firm’s compensation strategy.

For employers that have not taken steps to deal with pay transparency, the clock is ticking. As pay transparency requirements become more common, employers that forgo or delay even voluntary pay disclosures could inadvertently give the wrong impression. In some cases, they may be called upon to give a rationale for making only required disclosures.

“Why is a company only doing what’s required, and why doesn’t it disclose all pay information?” Rahman asks. “These are fair questions.”

Step 5

PREPARE EMPLOYEES TO HEAR THAT STORY

Communication about pay from employer to employee should also be a priority. “Fair pay requires measuring of pay gaps, but it’s also about perception and communication,” Clarke says. “Although pay fairness has been communicated to executives and understood in HR, organizations need to get better at communicating pay practices with managers and employees.”

Indeed, the dual challenges of pay transparency and competition for talent are forcing individual managers to have conversations with employees about pay regardless of whether either party is ready for that conversation.

“Companies struggle to communicate pay,” Madden says.

Yet, these conversations are critical. Half of employees are more likely to leave their job if they believe they’re paid below market, even if that’s not actually the case, according to research conducted by PayScale. After all, it’s the employee’s perception of their pay that matters here. Preparing managers for pay conversations with employees should be a priority, although only 49 percent of companies do so.

To change that, employers can focus on making sure their people managers have a solid grasp of the basics of the pay system.

For example, “they need to understand where the employee is in the pay range for their job,” says Brian Goldberg, senior vice president of global total rewards for human capital management software company Ceridian.

If certain employees think they’re being underpaid, this is the time to find out why they think so. With that insight, employers can help employ-

JOB CANDIDATES PREFER TRANSPARENCY

82% of U.S. workers are more likely to consider applying for a job if the pay range is listed in the job posting.

74% of U.S. workers are less interested in applying to job postings that do not list a pay range.

73% of U.S. workers are more likely to trust organizations that provide pay ranges in job postings than ones that do not.

Source: SHRM Research, 2023.

ees understand the data underlying the pay structure and the reasoning behind pay decisions.

When the information is readily available to employees internally and externally, they will already know what the increase will be if they move from one role to another, Mulvey says. For example, an employee contemplating a promotion who's at the top of the pay range in their current job will realize more readily (or with some help from their manager or HR) that they may receive only a modest increase with that promotion if their current salary is already at the midpoint of the pay range for their new role.

Eventually, this type of education about pay will have to permeate an organization from top to bottom to make a difference in employees' understanding of their pay and the employer's decisions about compensation. This resulting insight into the workings of the compensation system and pay-related decision-making can be a thunderbolt for managers and executives.

People often say that no one ever talks about pay that way, Parker says. However, if and when these conversations do take place, "it makes [everyone] feel empowered, because they have a foundation of knowledge to pay attention and ask better questions."

Employees may also need a briefing on the nomenclature of compensation. This can include an explanation about what "market" means to the employer when setting compensation levels. Conversations about the significance of a compensation midpoint can help manage employees' expectations regarding pay.

It could take time for employees' pay to reach the midpoint. "They may have to be a couple of years into a specific role with strong performance and demonstrated potential," Parker says. These discussions can also cover other relevant issues, such as geographic differentials, requirements to do a job well, and how skills acquisition and other factors can impact pay.

Step 6

LEARN FROM EXPERIENCE

The past few years have been a difficult learning experience for many organizations. How each one deals with the long-term impact on compensation practices will depend largely on their specific situation.

For example, as interest rate increases have raised the cost of capital, many growth companies have had to rethink their aggressive compensation approaches.

"In a high-interest-rate environment, you have to be more mindful of how you use capital in the business," Bradley says. "Instead of copying and pasting what other firms do, companies need to develop a realistic and sustainable compensation plan that will help attract talent the company can afford."

Sustainability and affordability are key issues for employers that rapidly increased pay in a desperate effort to attract and retain talent. An analysis by consulting firm Gartner of people who change jobs found that the typical job-switching premium was about 17 percent in 2022, while those moving to hard-to-fill jobs saw 25 percent increases in pay for changing jobs.

"Once the economy took a downturn, these salaries turned out to be unsustainable, and some organizations are rethinking their compensation strategies," says Tony Guadagni, a senior principal with the firm.

This type of learning will continue to be crucial as employers position themselves for an uncertain future. "Companies have always been able to adapt," Goldberg says. "The next few years will be interesting to watch." HR

Joanne Sammer is a freelance writer based in New Jersey.

The Child Care CRISIS

A shortage of child care options is causing stress for workers. But some employers are stepping up.

By Tamara Lytle

RUDI_SUARDI AND HUEPHOTOGRAPHY / ISTOCK

A single mother in California feared for her job as a UPS package handler each time she had to miss work because her child care provider fell through.

Just in time, UPS started a pilot program in 2022 to offer backup child care at its Lathrop, Calif., distribution center.

"Had this not happened, I would have had the decision of leaving my 6-year-old child at home or not showing up and losing my job," the woman told her bosses.

Her sentiments were shared by Danelle McCusker Rees, UPS' president of human resources and operations training, who says that's the problem that UPS officials sought to rectify when they started the program, which is now being expanded to other locations.

The backup child care option has reduced turnover, which saves on recruiting, McCusker Rees says. And it has helped the company with its inclusion, equity and diversity goals by providing a crucial benefit to female employees in particular: 90 percent of the workers who used the benefit in the pilot were women.

"The business case has been selling itself," says McCusker Rees, adding that the program caused a surge of excitement from a cultural perspective.

Businesses lose $23 billion a year in productivity because of child care challenges, according to the Miles Foundation in Fort Worth, Texas. The nonprofit helps lead and fund The Best Place for Working Parents, a network of business leaders who focus on family-friendly policies.


Sorry We're
CLOSED

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the nation's child care system was struggling, with teachers being lured away by higher-paying industries and providers scrambling to make ends meet. The government offered federal aid to child care centers during the pandemic, but it expired last fall—just as many companies began requiring remote workers to return to offices.

The situation has left many parents desperate. However, some employers, like UPS, are stepping up to support their employees.

12%

of workers had child care benefits from their employer as of March 2023.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

THE NEED

The loss of federal aid could lead to 3.2 million children without child care spots as programs fold, according to a June 2023 Century Foundation report. That could cause $9 billion a year in lost earnings for working parents who have to cut their hours or leave their jobs. And, in a domino effect, it could result in financial repercussions for the businesses that lose those workers.

"As companies are asking people to return to work, they need to offer a child care benefit if they're looking to meet employees where they are," says Jessica Harrah, chief people officer of KinderCare Learning Companies, based in Portland, Ore.

In a recent survey by Care.com, 80 percent of 500 HR executives said child care benefits have a positive influence on productivity, and 78 percent said they boost recruitment and retention.

However, such benefits don't help if there aren't slots available for care.

Already, 40 percent of families looking for day care are on waitlists, with an average wait time of six months, according to a study by the website BabyCenter.

When the pandemic hit, KinderCare saw the number of children in its facilities drop from 145,000 to 11,000. KinderCare temporarily shuttered most of its 1,000 centers nationally, but kept 300 open to serve essential workers.

The business has since rebounded, but finding quality teachers remains a challenge, Harrah says, especially as other industries draw workers away with higher pay. The problem, she says, is a tug of war between keeping costs down for working families and paying staff more to keep them working in child care.

KinderCare, which runs 80 onsite, employer-sponsored child care centers, has seen an 89 percent increase in interest from companies in employer-sponsored child care in the past year. And the number of KinderCare clients that offer care benefits jumped to 800 from 600 before the pandemic.

About 6,000 of KinderCare's own employees receive a child care tuition subsidy of 50 percent or more, and those using the benefit are 30 percent less likely to leave the company, Harrah says. Parents don't like disrupting their kids' lives, so the benefit drives retention, she explains.

However, Elliot Haspel, senior fellow at the think tank Capita in Denver, plays devil's advocate to the idea of companies providing subsidies and onsite care, arguing that employee subsidies don't increase the supply of child care workers.

"You're giving people a stipend to nowhere," says Haspel, author of *Crawling Behind: America's Child-care Crisis and How to Fix It* (Black Rose Writing, 2019). And onsite care creates inequities when far-flung employees don't have access to it and gig workers are left out, he says.

THE ABCs OF CHILD CARE BENEFIT OPTIONS

Companies that want to offer their workers help with child care have an array of options:

Onsite child care. Though it's not a common benefit, onsite child care offers convenience for workers, who can pop in and check on their kids during breaks. Some companies use third-party contractors to handle the actual care.

Emergency care. This option can be onsite or with a local care provider. Workers are absent less often when they have backup care for days when their regular child care arrangements fall through. The benefit is usually limited to a certain number of days per year.

Subsidies. This company-provided financial assistance can be used for onsite child care or for community providers. Companies can adjust the percentage they kick in depending on location, income or other factors. Some companies negotiate discounts for their employees with local day care centers and providers.

Dependent care flexible spending accounts. Workers can save on taxes when they set aside money in these accounts to pay child care bills. Even if companies aren't contributing to the accounts, employees get tax breaks for setting them up, says Sara Redington, chief philanthropy officer at the Miles Foundation. —T.L.

‘As companies are asking people to return to work, they need to offer a child care benefit if they’re looking to meet employees where they are.’

JESSICA HARRAH

Haspel believes that the child care system needs more public—not corporate—funding.

“It’s the same reason we don’t ask employers to provide elementary schools or fire service,” he says.

Vermont has a new, $120 million annual child care program funded by payroll taxes paid by both employers and workers that offers free or reduced-price care, depending on the parents’ income. Businesses lobbied for the program as a way to reduce absences among workers with child care jams and to increase productivity.

Companies have a stake in pressing for more available care, Haspel argues.

“Your employees need to have the care to go to work and be productive at work and not be stressed out about whether their child is safe,” he says. “If you want to have a vibrant business, you’re going to have parents as part of your workforce. You need to care about child care.”

EMPLOYER OPTIONS

Employment lawyer Ruth Vafek of Berger Singerman LLP in Tallahassee, Fla., says the pandemic inspired new public support for child care benefits as the challenges of working parents were better publicized and all types of employees started looking for more flexibility. Younger workers support the idea, even if they aren’t parents, because they appreciate employers that offer work/life balance, Vafek says.

As employers weigh what type of child care benefits to offer, there’s no one-size-fits-all answer, Vafek says. Options include onsite child care; subsidies for care, whether it’s onsite or elsewhere; help with backup child care for when the usual provider falls through; and dependent care flexible spending accounts (FSAs).

Backup care. Dijanira McClosky, head of health and welfare benefits at New York City-based Guardian Life Insurance Company of America, surveyed employees to find out what they value most in benefits. The company did so by tapping into a new employee resource group focused on caregivers. The group has been a huge help in getting the word out about the backup care benefit that Guardian offers, McClosky says.

Guardian provides up to 20 days a year of emergency care with an array of options for how to use it. Those 20 days can include discounted use of a day care center run by contractor Bright Horizons when regular care falls through. For older kids, parents can use the benefit to keep them occupied on school holidays with free virtual camps run by Bright Horizons. Or parents can use it toward discounted care in their own homes, for summer day camps and after-school programs, or even tutoring. (One day of backup care equals four hours of tutoring.)

“In the past, employers have focused on child care, but the reality is, caregivers have needs beyond that and they evolve as your child grows,” McClosky says.

About 7 percent of Guardian’s 5,500 eligible workers have enrolled in the benefit—up from 4 percent in

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> ‘Women were concerned about being able to grow their careers and grow their families at the same time.’
>
> DANELLE McCUSKER REES

2019—and 36 percent of those who signed up actually used it, which McClosky says is higher than industry benchmarks. The number of days of backup care used jumped almost 70 percent between 2022 and 2023.

Emergency child care benefits can come in the form of a referral network, subsidies for going to local providers such as Guardian's offerings, or onsite programs like the one at UPS.

Onsite care. The shortage of day care slots led USAA, a financial services company for members of the military, to expand its child care benefits. USAA has four onsite child care centers around the country for its employees, and now employees are allowed to use them for grandchildren, not just children, says Wendy Salmon, senior vice president of total rewards for the San Antonio-based company.

The onsite centers are run by Bright Horizons. For workers who don't live near one of USAA's four child development centers, and for the approximately one-third of employees who work remotely, USAA has an arrangement with Bright Horizons that offers priority access to its centers around the country.

In addition, employees who earn $50,000 or less a year receive a reimbursement from USAA for up to $3,000 annually in child care expenses. Those making $50,000 to $100,000 receive an income-based subsidy of less than $3,000. In total, the reimbursements cost the company $4 million in 2022, the program's debut year.

"Our employees love it," Salmon says of the new offerings.

Onsite care comes with some flexibility for USAA to tailor the care offerings to its particular workforce. When it got feedback from workers in Colorado Springs, Colo., that they needed the day care center to stay open 30 minutes later, the company changed the hours, Salmon says.

But onsite child care centers also require an investment in the maintenance and upkeep of the grounds (including playgrounds) and the safety of the building.

Salmon concedes that onsite day care presents some legal issues, so a close partnership with the day care provider and with corporate security and risks teams is important. Issues to think about include who has access to the center while kids are there, accreditation and licensing, and background checks of the teachers. Vafek says companies also may need a separate insurance policy for an onsite center.

Some risks can be mitigated, Vafek says, by contracting with a third-party care provider. However, companies should carefully review their contracts, she adds.

Like Guardian, USAA also offers backup care. Employees in a pinch can bring their child to a Bright Horizons center at the cost of $2 an hour or have a Bright Horizons employee come to their home to care for their youngster for just $4 an hour. The benefit is limited to 60 hours a year because it's not meant to replace a regular child care arrangement, Salmon says. But 550 employees depend on it each year.

CHILD CARE BY THE NUMBERS

The most common child care benefits and policies provided by employers are:

Dependent care flexible spending accounts **57%**

Policies allowing parents to bring their children to work in emergencies ***(as a backup to their regular child care provider)*** **32%**

Child care referral services that provide names of providers **13%**

Policies allowing parents to bring babies ***(under 1 year of age)*** **to work on a regular basis** **6%**

Subsidized child care centers or programs **4%**

Nonsubsidized child care centers ***(company-affiliated, onsite or nearby)*** **3%**

Source: SHRM's 2023 Employee Benefits Survey, 4,217 U.S.-based SHRM members responding.

JAKEOLIMB / ISTOCK

Dependent care accounts. Employer-provided child care subsidies can give companies offsets to their federal taxes, Vafek says. The exact tax breaks vary, so companies should check with their tax advisors.

Dependent care FSAs, like health savings accounts, can also give workers tax breaks. Companies need to communicate details such as whether subsidies are counted as taxable income and whether employees lose their dependent care FSA funds if they don't spend them.

"The critical thing is for employers to educate employees on the provisions, what they can and can't do, and the advantages," Vafek says.

WHAT WORKERS WANT

During the pandemic, women's overall workforce participation fell to a 33-year low, according to Sara Redington, chief philanthropy officer at the Miles Foundation. Benefits such as child care have had a huge impact on getting women to return to the workforce, Redington says.

"This is becoming, post-COVID, not just a 'nice to have,' but a 'must have,' " she says. "Family-friendly is this piece that actually could help solve multiple problems, not just the child care crisis that families and businesses are facing today, but really building healthier, happier, better, more prosperous employees, families and communities moving forward."

UPS saw its talent pool shrinking during the pandemic, and women were leaving faster than men. Despite a strong policy to promote from within, UPS was finding many women working part time were unwilling to take on full-time work, McCusker Rees says.

"Women were concerned about being able to grow their careers and grow their families at the same time," she says. "They felt like they had to make a choice and couldn't have both."

80%

of HR executives report that child care benefits have a positive impact on productivity, and 78% say they boost recruitment and retention.

Source: Care.com.

McCusker Rees found out what her employees needed through a focus group that took time to get to the bottom of the issues. Workers were sometimes reluctant to admit to their bosses that child care problems were causing them to miss work. Delving deeper, McCusker Rees found that daily child care wasn't the main stumbling block for employees. The bigger issue was handling emergencies when regular providers fell through.

Among the parents who used UPS' backup child care program in its first six months, there were 120 fewer absences, McCusker Rees says. Employee turnover dropped from 31 percent to 4 percent in that same period. The pilot started with part-timers on the 4 p.m. to 9 p.m. shift and was so popular that day-shift employees successfully lobbied for backup care.

The single mom in California who used the program not only stayed at UPS but moved up from being a part-time package handler to a full-time manager, McCusker Rees says.

UPS has opened new emergency day care locations in Pennsylvania and Ohio and plans more this year.

"We can't expand fast enough," McCusker Rees says. The program has helped differentiate UPS in attracting and retaining workers by underscoring the company motto, "You belong at UPS."

"We have to make that more than a tagline," she says. "This is one of the ways we share [that] we are focused on the entire human being—all of a person's needs." HR

Tamara Lytle is a freelance writer in the Washington, D.C., area.

LEARN MORE ABOUT CHILD CARE BENEFIT OPTIONS AT SHRM.ORG/DEPENDENTCARE

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF USAA

Mitchell says he wants to take professional roles where he will have the most impact.

LISTEN & LEARN

Matthew Mitchell, SHRM-SCP, chief people officer at the nonprofit CHRIS 180, saw early on the impact that HR can have on people's lives.

By Novid Parsi

Photography by Lynsey Weatherspoon

Matthew Mitchell, SHRM-SCP, describes a moment that reveals a lot about the Atlanta-based nonprofit CHRIS 180—and about his work as its chief people officer. A grandmother in the area had heard that counselors from CHRIS 180, which provides mental health services and support for youth and families could help her struggling grandson. “She came in through the front door frantic about getting help for her grandson, who was caught up in violence at school. And she wasn’t leaving until she got help for him,” Mitchell says. “We’re hiring for that—for employees who know and want to make an impact on what’s going on in the community.”

At CHRIS 180, Mitchell has overseen the hiring of HR professionals, therapists and others.

Amid escalating mental health care needs, CHRIS 180 has been growing rapidly, bringing on more therapists and hiring to fill numerous other positions. In December 2022, the nonprofit tapped Mitchell to help acquire and retain the people who can best meet this challenging moment.

"The first thing I did was listen," Mitchell says of his initial weeks on the job. He met with his HR team and employees across the organization to assess the nonprofit's talent challenges. "Instead of coming in and making a change, I wanted to know where we were, where we needed to go and how to fill that gap," he says.

His strategy demonstrated the qualities that had convinced his boss, Kathy Colbenson, CHRIS 180's president and CEO, that Mitchell was the right person for the role. "Matthew wants to solicit opinions different than his own and have a dialogue," she says. "He's open to feedback and wants to learn."

Nicholas O'Connor, a former colleague of Mitchell's, agrees. "A lot of times, when someone has knowledge, they tend to talk *at* people. Matthew is always willing to listen," says O'Connor, director of talent management at Ermi, an Atlanta-based medical equipment manufacturer. "He takes time to understand what people say to him and then to address it accordingly."

Equipped with the insights gained from his listening tour at CHRIS 180, Mitchell set out to drive change. First, he realized it would be difficult to grow the organization when his 10-member HR team had just one person devoted to recruitment, so he brought on two more recruitment specialists.

Second, he strengthened CHRIS 180's relationships with the larger community—for instance, by having his team attend more job fairs in metro Atlanta. Third, he persuaded the leadership team to approve funds to use LinkedIn's hiring tools, gaining better access to more qualified and interested job seekers.

And fourth, Mitchell implemented software that guides hiring managers in thoughtfully creating highly accurate, targeted job descriptions. "The tool forces the hiring manager to sit down, focus on the role in this time and place, and think about the type of person they need for the team to succeed," he says.

Mitchell's approach paid off. In 2023, CHRIS 180 experienced a 13 percent increase in headcount and now employs about 485 people. And it didn't stop there: At the end of last year, the nonprofit had about 35 job openings.

Hiring more people is just the first step, however. Mitchell's team also must support them to work effectively and to stay with the organization. Toward that end, Mitchell established performance management training—which is critical because the organization's fast growth means that some employees will become managers for the first time in their careers.

Moving forward, Mitchell will leverage data and metrics to help the organization's people function mature. In addition to increasing headcount, he also wants to improve metrics such as time-to-fill, turnover and offer-acceptance rates. "I have to look at the data, share it with my team and let them know how we're measuring HR's impact," he says.

KNOWLEDGE AND RESPONSE

Colbenson praises Mitchell's ability to drive organizational change in part by relying on others' expertise. "He doesn't feel he has to know everything already or have the answers," she says. "His goal is getting the right answer."

Mitchell had to develop that skill early in his career. In 2013, he was named a Presidential Management Fellow—the culmination of a highly competitive application process to a prestigious federal leadership development program involving more than 12,000 applicants and only about 660 finalists who could

'I'm not threatened by people with more knowledge in HR than me. I believe in surrounding myself with people who are smarter than me.'

Colleagues admire Mitchell's practice of soliciting opinions and listening to people to gain valuable insights.

apply for two-year appointments at federal agencies. As a fellow, Mitchell accepted an HR generalist position with the U.S. Small Business Administration, which had him relocate from Orlando, Fla., where he grew up, to Atlanta.

"I want to take roles where I'll have the most impact," Mitchell says of his career, which has taken him into industries as diverse as the public sector, creative services and health care.

Just six years after earning his bachelor's degree in business administration at Florida A&M University, and only two years after getting his master's in HR and change management at the University of Central Florida's College of Business Administration, Mitchell was overseeing HR team members across eight states. "I was looked at as the lead HR and administrative person for all these long-term HR professionals," he says. "It was a little bit intimidating."

But Mitchell quickly gained a vast amount of HR knowledge on topics including labor relations and HR systems by learning from those with more experience. "I'm not threatened by people with more knowledge in HR than me," he says. "I believe in surrounding myself with people who are smarter than me."

In 2014, after his fellowship, Mitchell joined CATMEDIA, a Georgia-based advertising and creative services agency, where he was an HR department of one. Once again, he learned on the job. "I was doing everything from recruiting to onboarding to training," Mitchell says. "I would not have been able to make mistakes and gain knowledge if the leadership team had not had faith in me."

In 2019, following a couple of years in employee relations for optical retailer National Vision, Mitchell joined Ermi as director of HR and change management. By then, Mitchell had developed a well-honed skill for listening and responding, and Ermi's people benefited from it.

Through engagement surveys, Mitchell found that many employees were having children—and wanted their employer to offer paternity leave. "I created a business case for leadership so I could say, 'Yes, there will be a cost, but in the long term, it will bring dollars into the business because we'll retain top sales talent,' " he says.

Mitchell successfully argued that paternity leave would improve employee satisfaction and retention. And he made use of the policy himself in 2020, when he and his wife, Philander Mitchell, a schoolteacher, welcomed their son, Christian. They also have a daughter, Brielle, who's now 9.

HR IN THE FAMILY

Because of his desire to create a lasting impact, Mitchell reflects carefully on the effects of what he does—and considers what he might have done differently. "When an employee resigns or is terminated, I always wonder: 'What if? Is there anything I could have done better?' " he says.

As his former colleague O'Connor says, "One of his biggest attributes is that he cares about people."

If Mitchell takes HR to heart, that's partly because the profession has always held a deeply personal place for him. His father, Ralph Mitchell, worked in HR for the Walt Disney Co.—starting just months before Walt Disney World opened in October 1971 and remaining with the company for 36 years. "He's the reason I got into HR," Mitchell says. "Anything I've wanted to do, I've wanted to do because of him."

Mitchell says he learned from his father and mother, Jennie Mitchell, an educator, the importance of professional reputation and of making a difference in people's lives.

"When I was little, I just thought I could go with my dad to his work in the summer and get into the park for free and run around with my friends," Mitchell says. But as a teen and young adult, when he had jobs at a car-rental company and other businesses, Mitchell met people who used to work with his father at Disney. Mitchell discovered the significance of his father's work. "Hearing stories of how my dad had a positive impact on people piqued my interest," he says. Even now, Mitchell says, he turns to his father for professional advice every day.

> 'At the end of the day, I'm a businessperson who solves problems. I just do that through the people part.'

Mitchell wants his own impact to be felt in the workplace—and beyond. He volunteers with Big Brothers Big Sisters of America and Phi Beta Sigma, and he mentors through SHRM. "My passion is working with younger HR professionals," he says. "I'm still relatively young, but HR professionals seek me out, and I talk about my experiences and how we can grow as HR professionals together. My door is always open." He means that literally: He typically keeps his office door open, he says, so that employees feel comfortable coming to him.

Mitchell's attentive leadership style allows him to understand what employees are experiencing—and allows them to feel heard. Mitchell says that soon after he joined CHRIS 180, a health care provider was unhappy about a particular HR policy and messaged him about it. Instead of simply sending a reply, Mitchell invited the individual to lunch and discussed the employee's larger goals and motivations.

Soon afterward, at a departmental meeting addressing employees' concerns, that health care provider spoke up on Mitchell's behalf. "He said, 'If you have concerns, Matt is different. He'll listen to you,' " Mitchell recalls. "That's important to me. At the end of the day, I'm a businessperson who solves problems. I just do that through the people part." HR

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

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LIFE SUPPORT

As the survivor ranks grow, more companies are taking steps to end the stigma around employees with cancer.

By Theresa Agovino

Bill Sullivan was laid off from his job as a software marketer at a tech startup in 2019 shortly after he returned from the second leave he took for treatment of ocular melanoma, a rare type of eye cancer. In 2021, he lost his job at a tech company about six months after asking for a new position at the suggestion of his oncologist who said he was compromising his health by performing a function that required simultaneously monitoring multiple computer screens all day. The New Hampshire resident says that when he indicated on job applications that he had a disability, the rejections came almost immediately. He stopped volunteering the information a few months ago.

"I think my cancer played a role [in my dismissals] for sure," says Sullivan, a 48-year-old who asked that his name be changed. "In general, a diagnosis makes you more vulnerable, more susceptible to layoffs. Companies don't want the liability if you have to go on long-term disability."

Many employees share Sullivan's fear of disclosing their cancer diagnosis at work. A survey by the French nonprofit Cancer@Work found that 50 percent of employees are afraid to reveal that they have the disease. Fear of losing their job, and with it their employer-provided health care, is the major reason people don't acknowledge their cancer in the workplace, experts say. Workers at small companies are especially nervous, because they say reporting their illness will make it easy for executives to pinpoint who is driving up health care costs. Other reasons for silence include the desire not to become a burden on teammates and concerns over being pushed off the career fast-track.

The Americans with Disabilities Act makes it illegal to fire someone with cancer because of their condition, and many employees can take up to 12 weeks of leave under the Family and Medical Leave Act. But the leave is unpaid, and many people can't afford to go without an income. Most companies offer short- and long-term disability insurance, though the policies don't cover a worker's full salary and do not protect the person's job.

"In one respect, I think I should check off the disability box," Sullivan says. "I feel like I should advocate for myself and advocate for people with hidden disabilities. At the same time, I feel like I'm saying I'm damaged goods."

Employers say they want workers to apprise them of their cancer diagnoses so they can adapt the employees' schedules and responsibilities to accommodate treatment, as well as help them navigate the often-confusing health care system to get the best medical services available. Finding quality care early can improve outcomes and save money. Research shows that most employers are trying to create a more supportive environment by training managers to become more sensitive, expanding benefits and starting support groups. And allowing employees to work through their treatment has been shown as a benefit to both employers and those who are fighting cancer.

SURVIVAL RATES INCREASE

Making employees comfortable with disclosing their condition will be more important going forward, as more people are living with cancer. There were 18.1 million cancer survivors—5.4 percent of the population—in the U.S. in 2022. That figure is expected to rise 24 percent, to 22.5 million, by 2032, according to National Cancer Institute's Division of Cancer Control and Population Sciences. Half of men and a third of women are at risk of developing the disease, according to the American Cancer Society. Cancer has been employers' biggest health care expense for the last two years, based on data from the Business Group on Health, an association of large employers.

Plus, many employees want to work through their treatments. Two-thirds (67 percent) of people with cancer said that working helped their recovery, according to the nonprofit Cancer and Careers. Around three-quarters of adults who worked during their treatments said doing so helped them cope with the disease.

"I'm single and I'm my sole income provider, and I needed the health insurance," says Renee Hill, who was diagnosed with stage 4 appendix cancer in 2016 and has undergone treatment while working for two different employers. "It was absolutely not an option for me to not work. I do think that having to work helped me, because it gave me something else to think about."

The push to get employees to discuss their cancer got a major boost last year when the charitable arm of Paris-based advertising and public relations giant Publicis Groupe launched an effort to end the disease's stigma in the workplace. The Working with Cancer Pledge urges employers to create a supportive environment for those with the disease and for workers who are caregivers for

22.5 MILLION

projected cancer survivors by 2032, an increase of 24.4% over 10 years.

Source: National Cancer Institute, 2022.

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those with the condition. Launched at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, in 2022; bolstered with ads during the Super Bowl last year; and backed by a $100 million ad budget, the initiative prompted roughly 1,200 organizations to take the pledge. A new phase of the program was slated to be announced this spring.

Publicis chairman and CEO Arthur Sadoun spearheaded the pledge after he was diagnosed with throat cancer in 2021. He said in interviews that he decided to address the issue because he heard from so many people who hid their diagnoses from their employers and thanked him for openly discussing his journey.

"There's really a lot of fear in that moment of diagnosis," says Gina Jacobson, program director of the Working with Cancer Pledge and a colon cancer survivor. "The first question that somebody asks after, 'Will I or won't I live?' is, 'Can I still work?' How do we make sure that at that moment of diagnosis, people know that they can expect to have a positive, supportive, recovery-focused workplace?"

One strategy Publicis adopted is to guarantee that any of its employees who are diagnosed with cancer will have a job for at least a year.

SUPPORT SYSTEMS

But new programs and policies aren't enough, according to Rebecca Nellis, executive director of Cancer and Careers. "You can't just start building trust with your employees in the acute moments," Nellis says. "I think most everyone runs their business with the best intentions and the hope that their employees feel loyal and supported and proud of the work that they're doing. But if you aren't actively building trust and thinking about how to create a trusting environment through all of the touchpoints that person has, the feeling isn't going to flow through."

Cancer and Careers' research found that only 43 percent of workers with cancer tell someone in the HR department about their condition—a statistic Nellis finds especially troubling. That's because HR professionals would generally be better equipped than managers to educate employees about the benefits and resources available to them. Nellis thinks workers' reticence reflects their belief that HR is looking out for the company and not employees. She adds that others may not think of HR because often they only hear from the department during open enrollment.

Nellis suggests that HR departments consider publicizing all types of benefits through sending out newsletters, hosting lunch-and-learns, and/or setting aside time when employees can ask general questions. "Use these as a way to be in touch when it isn't open enrollment and there isn't something bad happening," Nellis says.

Walmart Inc. signed the pledge, though it hasn't added new cancer-specific benefits to its offerings. Kim Lupo, the retailer's head of global rewards, says the

CANCER CAREGIVERS ALSO NEED SUPPORT

A diagnosis of cancer or another serious, chronic condition doesn't just affect the patient. It can take an enormous physical, emotional and financial toll on their caregivers, too.

There were roughly 53 million caregivers in the U.S. in 2020, and 61 percent of them were employed, according to a survey by AARP and the National Alliance for Caregiving. At least a third of the employed individuals haven't told their employers about their caregiving responsibilities. Like individuals with serious conditions, some caregivers fear that disclosing their status will put them at risk of being fired or discriminated against, experts say.

Employers are feeling the impact. Caregiving costs the economy $264 billion annually, due to factors including employee absenteeism and lost productivity, according to a 2021 report by the Blue Cross Blue Shield Association, a trade group representing 33 independent health insurers.

"Not enough companies are really working to engage their employees to understand what their caregiving responsibilities are," says Jason Resendez, president and chief executive officer of the National Alliance for Caregiving, a Washington, D.C.-based advocacy organization. "I think there needs to be this concerted effort to engage employees around caregiver conversations."

Caregivers in many companies are entitled to up to 12 weeks of leave under the Family and Medical Leave Act, though the leave is unpaid. The number of companies offering paid family leave has increased to nearly 40 percent, up from 32 percent in 2015, according to Resendez, adding that the jump is due to state mandates. He says that 90 percent of the companies that offer paid leave are in states where it's required by law.

Nine states, plus Washington, D.C., have laws mandating paid leave, according to New America, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank. Four more states will implement such laws by 2026.

The programs vary by state, and currently no state requires employers to pay a worker's full salary when they take leave to serve as a caregiver.

"The gaps and fragmentation underscore the need for national, federal action," Resendez says. He adds that it's particularly important because women, especially women of color, are often tasked with caregiving responsibilities, and many are forced to leave their jobs or reduce their hours, depriving them of their salaries and health insurance. —T.A.

53% of cancer survivors looking for a job believe prospective employers would treat them differently if they knew about their diagnosis.

Source: Cancer and Careers, 2022.

company has long highlighted the stories of cancer patients in various newsletters and town hall meetings to discuss Walmart's benefits and show how it supports its employees. Some executives discuss their cancer on their LinkedIn pages, Lupo adds.

"We try to be intentional," she says. Walmart offers employees on most of its medical plans a concierge service to help them navigate the health care system. The service provides access to high-quality treatments, makes doctor's appointments and even reserves hotel rooms for those traveling to receive care. Earlier last year, the retailer trained leaders on how to address the needs of employees who may be having mental health challenges—a big focus for the company. Lupo says the lessons on how to discuss sensitive matters and direct people to benefits will help cancer patients, too.

Pfizer Inc. employees can learn what it's like to work at the company while undergoing cancer treatment by speaking with their colleagues through a program started by two employees in 2012. That's when two breast cancer survivors launched the Butterfly Club, which matches cancer patients with in-house mentors who have had the disease, so they can talk to someone with similar experiences. The program was initially only for breast cancer patients, but in 2021 it was expanded to other forms of cancer, and the plan is to broaden it to include other chronic conditions.

Mentors complete a small amount of online training, but they're told not to offer any medical advice.

"It's really just about having a friend in your time of need who has been there," says Katrina M. Johnson, a U.S. director of advocacy and professional relations at Pfizer and a five-time cancer survivor. "It really gives us hope when we know we have a fellow colleague who has been in the same situation. It gives us community."

THE FMLA OPTION

Dr. Stacy Wentworth, medical director of cancer survivorship and a radiation oncologist at Atrium Health Wake Forest Baptist, a medical center in Winston-Salem, N.C., says most of her patients have had good experiences when they tell their employers about their diagnosis. Those with problems tend to work at smaller companies and nonunionized factories. She says that recently a patient who had finished treatment and went back to work at a manufacturing plant was let go because she still wasn't strong enough to perform the physically demanding job. Wentworth advises all her patients to apply for FMLA, which allows workers to take leave in small increments, so they have job protection.

"People are so reluctant and resistant to [take FMLA], and I guess it's because of our bootstrap, hard-working culture that they want to work through treatment," Wentworth says. "I have not had any cancer patient who does not want to try to work during treatments [for both financial and mental health reasons]."

She adds that patients tell her they don't need to apply for FMLA because they have understanding managers who have pledged to help them work through treatment. Still, supervisors may not understand all that's involved in treatment and how draining it can be.

'How do we make sure that at that moment of diagnosis, people know that they can expect to have a positive, supportive, recovery-focused workplace?'

GINA JACOBSON

DIGITALSTORM / ISTOCK

"Managers' patience can wear thin if you're taking a lot of time off and aren't as productive as you were in the past," Wentworth says.

An understanding boss and team are crucial for those who are working while they have cancer, according to patients and experts. "The people that have the biggest positive or negative impact on our well-being and our health are our direct teammates and our direct leader," says Jen Fisher, human sustainability leader at Deloitte. She notes that this is true even when people aren't sick.

Fisher was Deloitte's chief wellness officer when she was diagnosed with breast cancer eight years ago, and she worried that her disease would disqualify her from serving in that role. "My leader said, 'Jen, that's the dumbest thing I've ever heard you say,'" she recalls, "but in my mind, I thought, 'How can you have somebody with cancer telling everybody to take care of themselves?'"

Fisher chose to work through her treatments, though she modified her schedule. She stopped traveling for work and took time off when she needed it. She also blocked out time to nap during the day because her treatments left her fatigued.

"I told people what I wanted and what I needed," Fisher says. "I think most people are relieved when you tell them what you want and need because they want to help but don't know what to do."

'You can't just start building trust with your employees in the acute moments.'

REBECCA NELLIS

WORKING THROUGH TREATMENT

Hill says she was scared to tell her manager that her cancer had returned in January 2020 because it was her first day at her new job as a program coordinator in the Office of Research and Innovation at Marquette University in Milwaukee.

"I had to walk in and say I need every other Friday off because I need to have chemo again—they were incredibly understanding," says Hill, who is now a program manager at the Translational Glycomics Center at Versiti's Blood Research Institute in Milwaukee.

Her then-boss let her work at home because of her weakened immune system, she says, though after COVID-19 hit, that became the norm. She says she explained to her boss that she knew how to balance working with treatment because she had done it before. However, Hill says it was difficult starting a new job knowing that she wasn't able to perform at her best. "They never knew full-strength Renee," she says.

Bill Sullivan says he doesn't think his work suffered because of his condition. "I was super productive," he says. The company gave him a three-month trial in the marketing department, and after that period ended assigned him a permanent role. Three months later, that position was eliminated. Sullivan says the job was presented as an opportunity, but he suspects it was just a step toward getting rid of him.

Heidi Gray says she relates to people who don't want to tell their employers about their disease. She was diagnosed with ovarian cancer when she was 22 and never told anyone in her company for fear of losing her job. It was more than 30 years ago, but she still remembers how she had to sleep with her wig on during a business trip because she was sharing a room with colleagues. "It was awful, awful, awful," recalls Gray, who is chief people officer at Kargo, a mobile advertising company.

Kargo signed the Working with Cancer Pledge, and though Gray says the company hasn't publicly committed to guaranteeing cancer patients a job for a year as Publicis has done, it is operating under that premise.

Last year, a Kargo employee who was working under a performance improvement plan announced he had brain cancer. Gray says he was told not to worry about his job, and he was moved to a less stressful position for the time being. She adds that she understands that people could view that as a demotion or a step toward being let go.

"I look at careers as chapters, and for this chapter, this role is the best fit for [him] personally, as well as the company," Gray says. "Nothing is forever." HR

EXPLORE SHRM'S HOW-TO GUIDE ON HANDLING EMPLOYEES' REQUESTS FOR REASONABLE ACCOMMODATIONS AT SHRM.ORG/ADA-ACCOMMODATIONS

Theresa Agovino is the workplace editor for SHRM.

MODELS IN MENTORING

Liliya Joseph (left) has developed a mutually beneficial relationship with mentor Sarah LeMoyne-Davidson. ‘I’ve learned so much from mentees,’ LeMoyne-Davidson says, ‘especially Liliya. She helps me remember what it was like as an up-and-coming professional.’

Mentorships have long been a proven strategy for career success. Today's companies are customizing them to fit the unique needs of their diverse workforces.

By Kylie Ora Lobell

Successful mentorships can be career-defining and life-changing. Paired with a good mentor, mentees have the opportunity to learn the ins and outs of their chosen field, expand their professional networks and accelerate their career growth.

According to a survey by the American Society for Training and Development, a full 75 percent of executives say mentoring has been critical to their career development. A CNBC/SurveyMonkey Workplace Happiness Survey found that more than 90 percent of workers who have a mentor say they're satisfied with their jobs, including more than half (57 percent) who say they are "very satisfied."

To meet the professional goals of today's diverse workforce, many mentorship programs are tailored to specific groups of people. Case studies detail how programs are meeting the unique needs of people of color, first-generation college graduates, women business owners and women in traditionally male-dominated fields. Businesses win, too. Many companies that have made an investment in quality mentoring programs have found that they help retain valuable employees.

Indeed, mentees aren't the only beneficiaries of these arrangements. "Mentorship is a win-win situation," says Adrienne Mitchell, SHRM-CP, senior people operations partner at software firm DuckDuckGo in Paoli, Pa. "Mentors benefit by refining their leadership skills, gaining fresh insights and the reward that comes from seeing your mentee hit their goals. There is no greater joy than knowing you were a part of someone's success story."

Diane Rosen, an executive coach and principal and co-founder of Compass Consultants, a workplace/HR consultancy in New York City, says that mentorships help mentees understand the norms and expectations of a particular organization, type of business and career field. "There's a transfer of institutional and professional knowledge, and mentors also have something to learn from mentees, who may bring new ideas or perspectives to them," she says.

Adanta Ahanonu, chief program officer at COOP Careers, a national mentorship program for first-generation and low-income college graduates, says the guidance she received from her own mentor—who helped her transition from the corporate world to the nonprofit sector—inspired her to give back. "With my mentor's encouragement, I was empowered to make the switch … and follow my passions," Ahanonu says. "As a mentee, I have seen numerous times how critical receiving mentorship is. As a result, I continue to lift while I climb by offering mentorship myself."

Following are six examples of successful pairs who have leveraged mentoring programs to build rewarding professional relationships (and friendships) and grow their careers. Their stories illustrate how both traditional mentorships and new and emerging models can help foster professional development for all employees.

The State of Mentoring

Based on a survey of more than 330 HR professionals:

64%
say their organization has a mentoring program.

55%
say they're satisfied or very satisfied with their mentoring program.

64%
report using a hybrid approach to their mentoring program, with mentors and mentees meeting virtually and face-to-face.

86%
report having an internal program manager for their mentoring program.

Source: *Mentoring in the Workplace 2022*, Art of Mentoring.

PAGES 70-71: PHOTOGRAPH FOR *HR MAGAZINE* BY R.J. HARTBECK

Clary (left) was paired with McLaughlin through the in-house mentorship program at Raffetto Herman Strategic Communications.

Bonnie & Kelsey: An Outside Perspective

At Raffetto Herman (RH) Strategic Communications, a public relations firm in technology, health care and the public sector with offices in Seattle and Washington, D.C., new hires are matched with a mentor as soon as they start at the company.

"Personally, this attracted me to the organization, as it signaled that RH has a vested interest in my success and career growth," says Kelsey Clary, a senior public relations associate who joined the company in Washington, D.C., four years ago.

Clary has had multiple mentors at the company, the most recent being Bonnie McLaughlin, RH's vice president and PR lead, who also works in the company's D.C. office. The pair meet in person biweekly to track projects and problem-solve.

"Her open-door policy makes Bonnie an ongoing resource and supporter in my career and growth," Clary says. "Setting goals allows our mentorship meetings to stay focused and dive into specific topics."

"Our mentorship program is designed so that your mentor is not someone you work with on a day-to-day basis, so your discussions never turn into a checklist of what's happening across your account portfolio," McLaughlin says.

"They're intended to be growth and problem-solving sessions with someone who has an outside view and perspective."

While Clary says she has gained a "champion, coach and go-to resource" in her mentor, McLaughlin has also benefited from their relationship.

"There's nothing more rewarding than mentoring a colleague, especially one from whom you can learn," she says.

"I also share challenges and solutions unfolding in my own work, making the partnership very reciprocal for Kelsey," McLaughlin adds. "The mentee gains another advocate and confidante at the company, and that deepens the connection we have as an overall organization."

PHOTOGRAPH FOR *HR MAGAZINE* BY CASSIDY DUHON

Sandi & Shannon: A Business Plan

Shannon Wilkinson had just launched Reputation Communications, a New York City-based online reputation management firm for CEOs and other corporate leaders. Word of mouth about her firm was spreading. She had steady clients and consistent revenue. However, Wilkinson had few formal business processes in place, and she began feeling overwhelmed.

"Too much day-to-day work depended on me," says Wilkinson, now based in Hilton Head, S.C. "I did not have a well-conceived marketing system."

One day, after Wilkinson spoke to Jane Wesman, founder and president of Jane Wesman Public Relations Inc., and then-president of the New York City chapter of the National Association of Women Business Owners (NAWBO), about her new company's growing pains, Wesman suggested that she join NAWBO's one-on-one mentorship program, which would pair Wilkinson with an experienced businesswoman.

In 2012, Wilkinson applied and was accepted into the program and was paired with Sandi Webster, a board member of the New York City chapter of NAWBO and founder and CEO of the coaching firm Sandi Webster LLC. "I felt that I could provide valuable guidance to [Shannon] by making minor adjustments that would lead to incremental revenue," says Webster, who lives in New York City's Brooklyn borough. "She was a one-woman operation, and I believed she had the potential to make a significant impact on the marketplace."

The two women met in person every other Friday morning at a New York City cafe, where they dove into the details of how Wilkinson ran her business and determined what she could do to improve her operations. Often, the mentee would present her mentor with a challenge she was facing. In one such case, Wilkinson was trying to launch a new product, a reputation risk report that details the strengths and weaknesses of a company's top executives, to a major client.

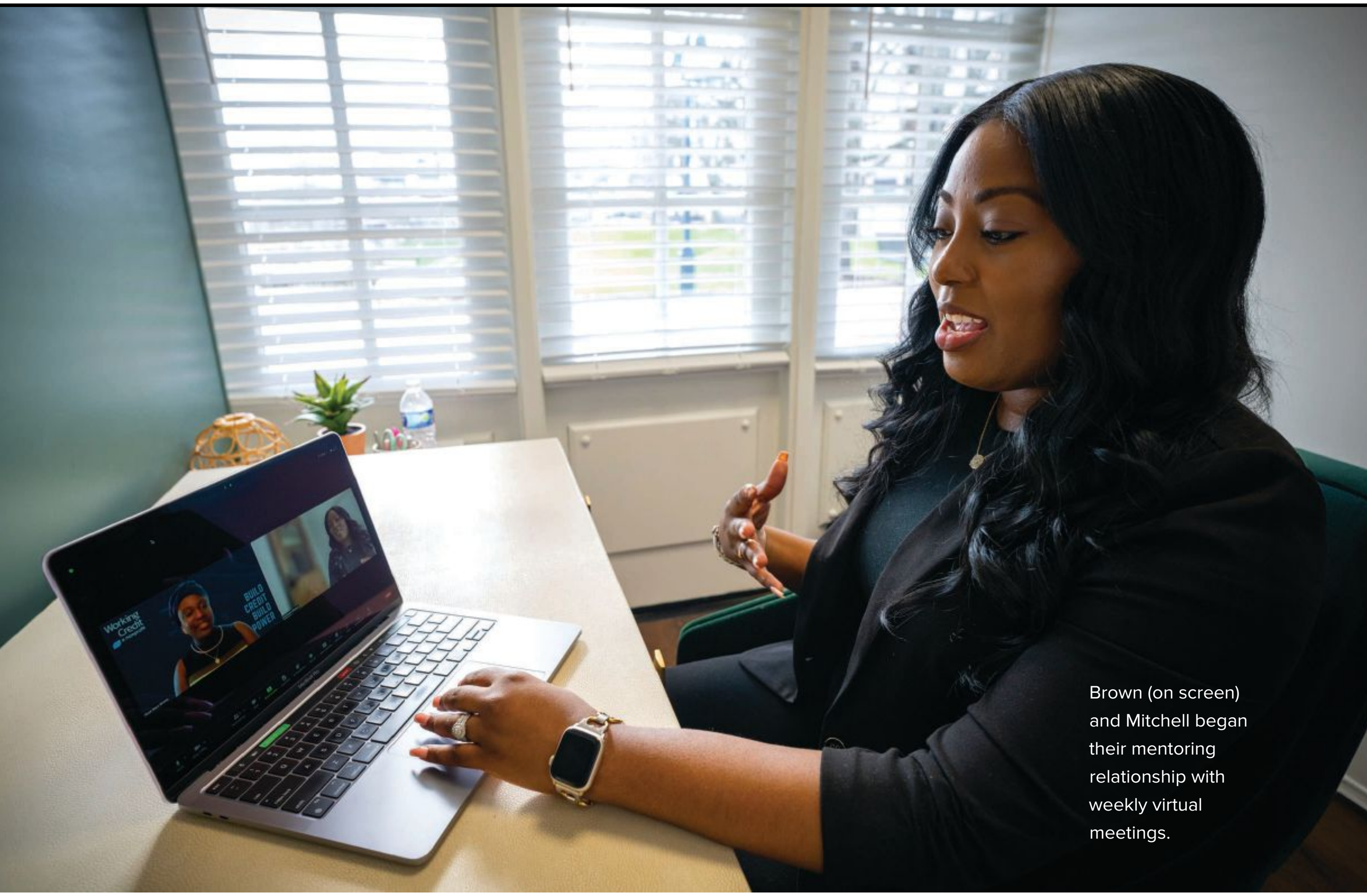
"They weren't biting," Wilkinson says. Webster suggested that Wilkinson give the client the report for free.

"The reports were time-consuming to prepare and priced at $10,000 each," Wilkinson says. "But I followed her advice. Within two weeks, I received a contract for 10 reports. Some of those executives are still clients today."

The mentoring program had a profound impact on Wilkinson's business and gave her the foundation she needed to succeed. And Webster gained something in return: a treasured friendship with a fellow business owner and the opportunity to give back.

"Through this mentoring experience, I gained valuable insights into a growing area within the marketing space, which was not something my marketing company specialized in," Webster says. "Shannon and I have maintained contact, ... and I know I can rely on her for assistance if needed."

Webster (left) helped Wilkinson overcome challenges and unlock the potential of her new reputation management business.



Brown (on screen) and Mitchell began their mentoring relationship with weekly virtual meetings.

PHOTOGRAPH FOR *HR MAGAZINE* BY ANDRÉ CHUNG

Adrienne & Rosemary: Mentoring for Life

Adrienne Mitchell of DuckDuckGo volunteers as a mentor with Black in HR. This national mentoring program is specifically tailored to Black professionals and fosters professional development through one-on-one mentorships.

Mentees who apply to the program can be at any stage of their career—from a recent graduate to a member of the C-suite. They can either choose their mentor from a list in the Black in HR program or opt to have someone selected for them to match their professional needs.

"My love of mentorship started at a young age, as a volunteer teen counselor at my local Boys & Girls Club," says Mitchell, who works remotely from Owings Mills, Md. "Then, when I attended college at Morgan State University, my love for mentorship was multiplied through the Morgan mentoring program, when I had the opportunity to mentor girls at surrounding middle schools."

After signing up to be a mentor for Black in HR, Mitchell was matched with Rosemary Brown, who had just started a position as chief strategy officer at Working Credit, a nonprofit headquartered in Chicago that helps people in any financial situation overcome the obstacles to good credit. For six months, the two women met virtually each week, and then biweekly, as Brown, who works out of Boston, achieved her professional goals.

"Our time together focused on helping Rosemary be successful early on in her role," Mitchell says. "Some of the topics we discussed were executive presence, how to navigate conflict, people leadership, discovering her executive leadership style and her strengths, and opportunities for growth."

During the mentorship, Brown learned how to navigate relationships with her new peers on the executive team, communicate her vision more effectively and successfully transition into her role. "I appreciate how Adrienne gave me the space to find my way through topic areas by providing insight and advice, but not making any decisions for me," Brown says. "She was comforting while still holding me accountable."

Orozco Mejia (left) mentors Peña through a program that serves first-generation college grads.

PHOTOGRAPH FOR *HR MAGAZINE* BY ADAM LERNER

Kristian & Connie: Peer to Peer

Founded in 2014, COOP Careers is a nonprofit national workforce development organization offering mentorships that serve as a bridge from college to career, facilitating the crucial transitions that college graduates must make to secure full-time employment. Having successfully served more than 4,400 mentees since its launch, the primary goal of COOP Careers is to address the "social capital gap" often experienced by under- and unemployed, first-generation, low-income college graduates who may lack the connections necessary to launch their careers and obtain upward economic mobility.

Each spring and fall, COOP convenes diverse peer cohorts of 10 to 16 first-generation college graduates in Chicago; Los Angeles; Miami; New York City; San Francisco; and San Jose, Calif. Each cohort is led by a team of four captains—COOP program alumni who return to serve as coaches, mentors and guides.

Adanta Ahanonu, COOP's chief program officer, says the organization's peer-to-peer mentoring model "has been the most impactful in helping recent college graduates achieve full-time employment. Many of the students in our program are on similar career paths and seeking to overcome underemployment or secure their first full-time job."

Mentees choose among three mentoring tracks: data analytics, digital marketing or financial services. Each tuition-free program runs for 16 weeks, during which time participants meet four times a week to learn technical skills, meet potential employers and build relationships to secure full-time employment.

Kristian Orozco Mejia—now an associate manager of e-commerce at

OMD USA, an advertising services firm in New York City—is a program alum who returned to COOP Careers to serve as an executive captain of new mentoring cohorts.

"I decided to take part as a captain in COOP's mentoring program to be able to pay back to my community," Orozco Mejia says. "While I was a student, COOP provided me with so many opportunities and learning experiences to be able to land my first full-time job in digital marketing and excel in it. I wanted to help others who are in the same shoes as I was and help them achieve their goals."

COOP paired him with Connie Peña, who was living in New York City and feeling lost in her career after graduation. "I decided to join because I needed some guidance, and COOP provided that for me," says Peña, who chose the digital marketing track. There, she learned skills of the trade by meeting both in person and virtually with Orozco Mejia and other peers in her cohort.

"As a trained captain/mentor, I provide mentorship to all my students in the peer cohort," Orozco Mejia says. "During my time with them, I always made sure they have a checklist of next steps they needed, such as editing a resume."

For Peña, the COOP mentorship program proved to be incredibly valuable: She learned soft skills, such as how to be effective in interviews; hard skills, such as Microsoft Excel; and how to make an elevator pitch. Peña landed a job as a medical records clerk at Ricigliano & Filopei, a law firm in New York City.

"Besides skills, I gained connections and a strong support system," Peña says. "I met many peers who had gone through what I was going through and those who were figuring it all out, just like me. Many of us were in the same boat, so we figured it out together, which gave me a sense of security and guidance on the right path to new opportunities."

MENTORSHIP PROGRAM BEST PRACTICES

Want to develop a mentorship program of your own? These expert tips can help you avoid oversights and missteps that can sabotage your program before it's out of the gate. Make sure you're deliberate in what you want to achieve, and incorporate a structure that benefits both sides of the mentoring equation.

- **Recruit into your program people who genuinely want to be mentors and mentees** and are committed to building relationships with one another. "There's nothing worse than being assigned to someone who has no interest in the program," says Diane Rosen, an executive coach and principal and co-founder of Compass Consultants.
- **Create a formal program and thoroughly screen applicants.** "Good programs [will] have an application process that focuses on mentoring those who are willing to put in the time," says Rik Nemanick, author of *The Mentor's Way* (Routledge, 2016).
- **Incorporate an orientation.** "One differentiator of a good mentoring program is teaching people how to get the most out of the program," Nemanick says. "Too many programs pair people together and provide a very basic orientation, not really preparing the protege or mentor for their roles."
- **Establish clear goals for what you want to achieve**—both on the mentor and mentee side—and show up for them.
- **Know when it's time to end it.** "There should be an off-ramp for mentorship pairings that are not working out," Rosen says. "If either one doesn't show up for the meetings, it doesn't work," adds Sandi Webster, the Brooklyn, N.Y.-based founder and CEO of the coaching firm Sandi Webster LLC. "If either mentee or mentor is unhappy with their match, regardless of reason, ask for a replacement. Time and money are being wasted." *—K.O.L.*

'Good mentors take their lead from their proteges, learning what they want to learn and adapting along the way.'

RIK NEMANICK

Alice & Stephanie: STEM Challenges

As an assistant professor of chemistry at McDaniel College in Westminster, Md., Stephanie Bettis Homan wasn't looking for just any professional mentorship. She wanted to learn from another woman who had made it in her chosen field. She knew the hard facts about women in STEM (science, technology, engineering and math): While they make up half of the total U.S. college-educated workforce, the National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics say that women account for only 35 percent of the workforce in STEM. And research indicates that women leave STEM fields at a much higher rate than men.

Homan knew that the few women who attain leadership positions in STEM often leave under the stress of balancing their personal and professional lives. "It was important to me to find another STEM professor who was balancing job responsibilities with motherhood, and the STEM-UP Network was willing and able to arrange that relationship," Homan says.

The mission of the STEM-UP Network, which was founded in 2011 at Harrisburg University of Science and Technology in Harrisburg, Pa., is to place women from STEM fields into mentorships with other women who can support their advancement. STEM-UP's signature mentoring program—in which more than 400 women have participated in the past 10 years—pairs students and early-career professionals with experienced professionals based on their chosen fields and goals.

Bilitia "Bili" Mattes, executive director of STEM-UP, says the paucity of women in STEM fields makes this mentoring program crucial.

"Research shows that we lose over 50 percent of the ... women in STEM in the first 10 years of their careers for reasons that can often be addressed and overcome," Mattes says. "This makes addressing the gender talent gap in the STEM workforce with inclusive recruitment, retention and advancement strategies and practices a business imperative."

Homan met virtually with her mentor, Alice Armstrong—an associate professor in the Department of Computer Science at Shippensburg University in Shippensburg, Pa.—once a month to gain insight into topics ranging from interpersonal interactions with her colleagues to how to advocate for promotions.

"Alice has encouraged me to advocate for myself at work in ways that have helped me to be an effective professor ... while also being present for my family at home," Homan says. "Until I was in a mentorship with Alice, I didn't realize how valuable it is to have a mentor to bounce ideas off of and help articulate my needs and desires in the workplace."

"I connected with Stephanie particularly around issues of being a parent and an academic," Armstrong says. "My own experience of becoming a parent was not as smooth as I thought it would be, ... and I have found that those experiences mean that I can provide a safe place for people to share and discuss their challenges around this major transition."

Armstrong (left) and Homan, both STEM scholars, talk often about how to achieve work/life balance.

Joseph (left) says LeMoyne-Davidson helped expand her network and became her go-to source for workplace advice.

PHOTOGRAPH FOR *HR MAGAZINE* BY R.J. HARTBECK

Sarah & Liliya: Moving Up

In 2021, Liliya Joseph, SHRM-SCP, was at a crossroads in her career. She had previously worked in the nonprofit sector as an HR manager, and she wanted to move up. After obtaining her master's degree in human resources from Washington University in St. Louis, she signed up for the mentoring program at the St. Louis SHRM chapter in hopes of obtaining some career guidance.

The SHRM program is a 12-month partnership that helps HR professionals who have been in the field for at least six months and are looking for career guidance. Each autumn and spring, the program pairs five to 10 HR professionals who want to grow in their careers with seasoned HR leaders.

"Each protege is pursuing personally meaningful goals and has needs that are different from others," says Rik Nemanick, principal consultant at Nemanick Leadership Consulting, who co-leads the mentoring program. "Good mentors take their lead from their protege, learning what they want to learn and adapting along the way."

Joseph was matched with Sarah LeMoyne-Davidson, vice president of human resources and a partner at Roeslein & Associates Inc., a St. Louis-based international engineering, manufacturing and construction firm. Once a month for a year, LeMoyne-Davidson met Joseph for coffee in St. Louis or connected virtually to discuss what was going on in Joseph's career and how she could help.

"Sarah connected me with some useful contacts in the HR industry and made herself available during critical times," Joseph says. "She was empathetic, kind and generous with her time. [Sarah] has become my guide in workplace advice."

Today, Joseph works remotely for Los Angeles-headquartered global software company SquareGPS as an HR generalist, and she continues to meet with LeMoyne-Davidson for check-ins. "The impact of the mentorship program is huge, and I would highly recommend it to any future practitioners," Joseph says. "After the program ended, [Sarah and I] continued our connection and friendship. I'm very grateful for this opportunity."

LeMoyne-Davidson agrees. "I've learned so much from mentees, especially Liliya," she says. "She helps me remember what it was like as an up-and-coming professional with big aspirations." HR

LEARN MORE ABOUT SHRM'S MENTORSHIP PROGRAMS AT SHRM.ORG/MENTORING

Kylie Ora Lobell is a freelance writer in Los Angeles.

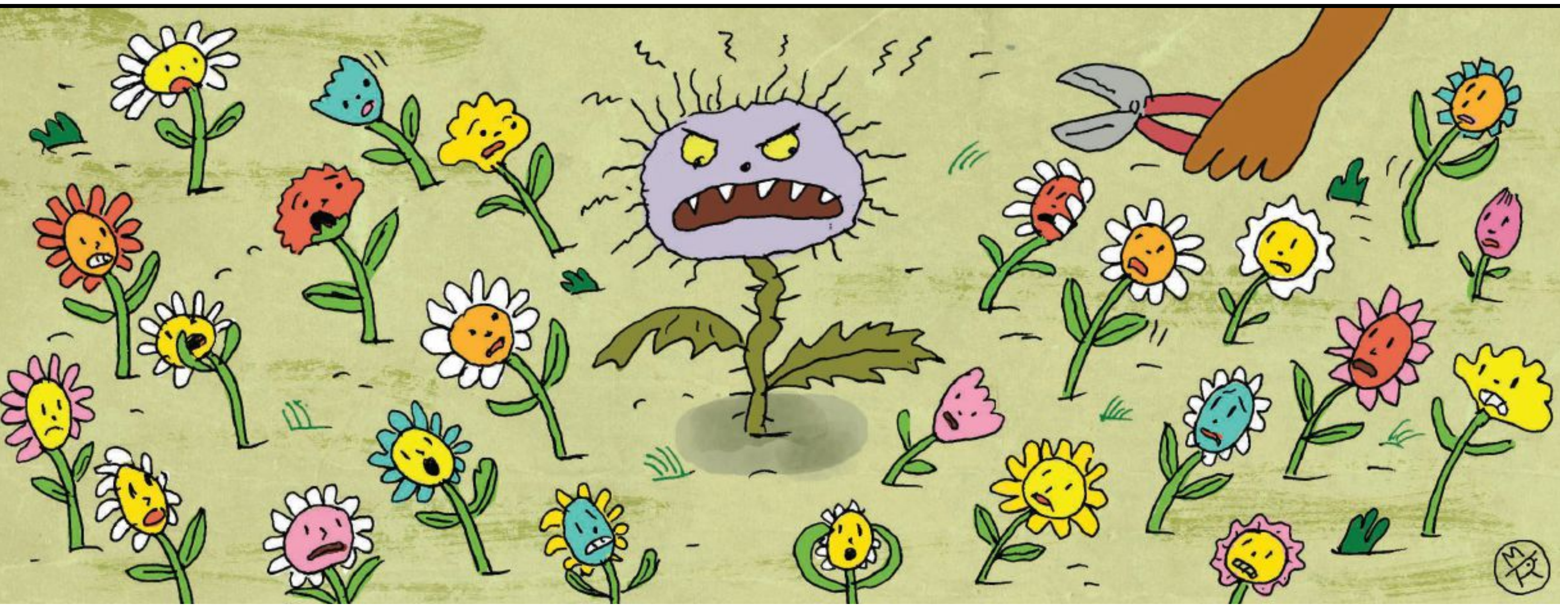


ILLUSTRATION BY MARC ROSENTHAL FOR *HR MAGAZINE*

MANAGING PEOPLE

DEALING WITH TOXIC EMPLOYEES

A toxic workplace culture can cause valued employees to flee your company. Here's how to neutralize toxic workers before they infect your team.

By Kylie Ora Lobell

In the midst of the pandemic, the Great Resignation shook the U.S. workforce. Between April and September 2021, a record 24 million Americans resigned from their jobs. Employers were desperate for staff, offering attractive signing bonuses and wage bumps. Still, many employees held out for more. Scores of employers were left scratching their heads and wondering why.

Revelio Labs—a provider of workplace intelligence—gathered data that provides some insight. Revelio analyzed 34 million online employee profiles, as well as company reviews, to identify U.S. workers who left their employers for any reason between April and September 2021, and the reasons why they left.

Revelio's research revealed that a toxic corporate culture was the No. 1 reason why most workers left their jobs. In contrast, how frequently and positively employees mentioned compensation ranked 16th in predicting employee turnover. A toxic corporate culture was more than 10 times as likely as compensation to predict a business's attrition rate compared to its industry peers.

INFECTIOUS TOXICITY

Though there's no doubt that toxic culture can flow from the top down, it may also originate with rank-and-file workers. Employees who are toxic can make their colleagues feel uncomfortable, damage productivity and morale, and lead to other workers becoming disengaged and ultimately quitting their jobs.

"In this age of increasingly unruly behavior, employers need to grow their spines and be prepared to manage toxic behavior, aka unacceptable conduct, confidently," says Laura Crawshaw, author of *Grow Your Spine & Manage Abrasive Leadership Behavior: A Guide for Those Who Manage Bosses Who Bully* (Executive Insight Press, 2023). "Failure to do so will be costly, calculated in terms of attrition of good employees, paralysis of production, and a perception on the part of employees that management fails to intervene because they are weak or tacitly condone toxic behavior."

To prevent toxic employees from infecting an entire team or department, Crawshaw says, managers must first learn to identify those employees. There are several ways to do this.

According to Lisa Sterling, chief people officer at Perceptyx Inc., a provider of an employee listening and people analytics platform in Temecula, Calif., a toxic employee is continually disruptive, complains about leadership and does not get along well with other employees.

"Behaviors demonstrated by toxic employees include withdrawal, lack of engagement, higher frustration, easily agitated, lack of pride in their work, and complaints about the organization or leadership," Sterling says.

Jennifer Libby, a Kansas City, Mo.-based district manager for the HR consulting firm Insperity, echoes that sentiment. "Toxic employees can be identified as individuals who exhibit mean behavior, possess a 'put-down' spirit and continuously make the effort to disrupt morale," Libby says. "This type of employee usually self-isolates and is heavily self-centered."

TOXIC VS. DIFFICULT

While some employees may be truly toxic, it's important for leaders to keep in mind that there is a distinction between "toxic" and "difficult." For one thing, difficult employees may be more likely to hear managers out.

"Toxic employees differ from a difficult employee based on the notion that difficult employees can be reasoned with and are open to conversations regarding what is affecting their behavior," Libby says.

If an employee is remote, it may be harder to determine whether they're acting in a toxic manner. According to Libby, some behaviors to watch out for include verbally micromanaging others during group calls and initiating gossip with other attendees via chat.

"These actions can be toxic and quickly bring down morale," she says. "As with every work arrangement, leadership must outline behavior, performance and communication expectations from the start."

TOXICITY TIPS

Managers who know how to handle toxic employees and be proactive about solving issues before they get out of hand are more likely to be able to cultivate peace in the workplace. Here are some ways to do that:

Address the behavior right away. Regardless of whether an employee is toxic or difficult, remote or in person, managers should take swift action to intervene before the behavior drives down morale in the department or organization as a whole.

"Waiting until they disrupt others can create far more problems and cause retention issues with your best people," Sterling says.

Document everything. To protect every party involved—including the company they work for—managers should thoroughly document what is going on to create a record, should action need to be taken against an employee. "It's important for leadership and management to properly document the issue, any steps taken to address it and any disciplinary actions taken," Libby explains.

It's also vital for managers to record the steps they've taken to address the employee's behavior.

"Listen to employees and any issues they may have with another employee," Libby says. "When toxic behavior has been identified, it could be helpful to separate [the employees] from each other, which may mean a different desk arrangement or shifting teams. All these solutions should be documented."

She adds that managers should also detail the services or resources they give the toxic employee and how they did or didn't change in response.

Confront the employee directly. Managers should personally confront the employee in question one on one to give them a chance to address their toxic behavior.

"The behavior could be due to issues with leadership or individuals in the workplace, private matters outside work or, in some instances, the employee may lack the self-awareness to see the harm they're causing their colleagues," Libby says. "When addressing concerns, foster a space of honest communication."

Crawshaw suggests that managers set limits and consequences for the behavior of the employee in question. Companies should also offer help via internal mentoring or external coaching for employees who they want to retain. "If the abrasive employee can turn around their interactive style, great," Crawshaw says. "If they can't, they need to go."

Cara Shortsleeve, co-founder and CEO of the Leadership Consortium, which produces a leadership development platform in Cambridge, Mass., says managers should "give the individual direct and specific feedback and make your expectations clear [by saying], 'XYZ behavior is not acceptable on our team.' "

Even if an employee brings tremendous value to a company, they can also cost it a great deal, Shortsleeve says.

"The challenge for leaders of toxic employees is that their value is often easier to quantify than their costs," she explains. "That's because their value is known today. For example, Timmy Toxic always exceeds his sales quota, Tina Toxic is the best engineer we have, Ted Toxic has our highest win rate as a litigator, etc. The costs of their toxicity are often only apparent down the line, for example, through increased employee attrition spikes or increased reputational risk."

It's critical to think about not only the immediate impact but also the long-term effects that a toxic employee can have. "If you don't see a change, make the tough call and part ways fast," Shortsleeve says. "The long-term pain associated with toxic employees is never worth the short-term gain."

Ideally, with constructive feedback, toxic employees will change their behavior. But if it comes down to a choice between one person's employment and the well-being of the team or department as a whole, managers must be prepared to terminate toxic workers.

"Organizations must ensure every employee is given the opportunity to be in a toxic-free environment," Sterling says. "It's up to leadership and managers to create a space where employees can be their most authentic selves and thrive at work." HR

Kylie Ora Lobell is a freelance writer based in Los Angeles.

YOUR CAREER

BECOME AN HR INFLUENCER

Writing blogs and producing podcasts can boost your career. But it's hard work.

By Rita Zeidner

SIDDHIPHONG / ISTOCK

When blogger Suzanne Lucas learned that a national bakery chain was illegally requiring job applicants to work a trial shift for free, she turned it into a teachable moment.

"Hiring is frustrating, and hiring for overnight work is definitely more challenging than hiring for daytime shifts, but you still can't require five hours of free labor," she wrote in a column posted to her Evil HR Lady website last fall.

The article also went out to her 30,000 Facebook followers, the 9,700 subscribers to the Evil HR Lady newsletter, and millions of readers of *Inc.* magazine.

Technically, Lucas still runs an HR advisory firm out of her home in Basel, Switzerland—a business she started in 2009 when she left a corporate HR job outside of Philadelphia to join her husband overseas. But these days, consulting is mostly a sideline for her.

The popularity of the HR-centric commentary she began writing for fun and posting to Evil HR Lady in 2006 has led to steady, paid gigs writing about HR for several widely read media outlets, including CBS News and *Inc.* These assignments, in turn, led to a slew of lucrative public speaking opportunities worldwide that now generate the lion's share of Lucas' income.

"I really loved working in corporate," she says. "But I started down this other path, and it's been a great path. Being able to support my family while I write and give advice is really awesome."

Lucas may be one of the first HR pros to master online communications and become an influencer in the field. But an increasing number of HR professionals are now pursuing a similar path, recognizing that sharing expertise with peers can both nurture a passion and boost their careers.

"I'm always looking for new ways to connect with an audience," says Aiko Bethea, who runs RARE Coaching and Consulting, an executive development firm in Atlanta.

Her goal as an influencer, she says, is to give business leaders the tools to develop diversity, equity and inclusion strategies that will make their organizations more effective.

Named a top anti-racism educator by *Forbes* magazine and HR tech company Culture Amp, Bethea has written articles on workplace equity for prestigious publications such as *Harvard Business Review.*

But she also relies on more accessible platforms such as LinkedIn, where she has more than 41,000 followers, to share ideas and get feedback.

The fact that LinkedIn offers multiple ways to communicate, including newsletters, video and podcasting, is an added plus, Bethea says. For example, Street Lights, a weekly newsletter she launched last year on LinkedIn to address diversity and leadership challenges, quickly attracted more than 15,000 subscribers.

WORKING FOR A CAUSE

Jeanne Achille, CEO of The Devon Group, a Red Bank, N.J.-based public relations and communications firm, tapped into her background in human resources and payroll systems to promote opportunities for women in technology.

"The advancement of women in business is at the core of my passion," Achille says.

She began blogging about HR tech more than 20 years ago and now co-hosts The Work, a weekly podcast about workplace challenges.

But Achille burnished her reputation as an HR tech influencer by organizing major events such as the HR Tech Virtual Conference and the Women in HR Tech Summit.

Rocki Howard, a diversity advocate and former recruiter in Jacksonville, Fla., says she hopes that at least some of the 13,000 followers she amassed as a public speaker, podcaster and recruiter will turn into customers for her new Diversiology.IO, a subscription-based platform to help businesses build more engaged and inclusive workplace cultures.

"Adding value to and nurturing relationships with your audience can directly impact the success you see in your business endeavors," she says, "whether you're an entrepreneur or work for a company."

DO YOUR RESEARCH

Those who have made the leap to influencing suggest ways to avoid potential pitfalls:

Beware of hidden costs. The large, well-known social media platforms provide a no- or low-cost avenue for getting your foot in the door as an influencer. But building a social media following has costs that can easily be overlooked.

"You have to be willing to invest both your time and money," says Howard, who frequently spends 20 to 30 hours to produce a single half-hour podcast.

And there are costs to making your product look and sound professional. Achille says she hires a sound engineer to produce her weekly podcast. The hourly rate for such services typically ranges from $50 to $200.

THE FIRST STEPS

Finding a niche and developing a following is time-consuming. For HR professionals intrigued by the possibility of becoming an influencer, here are some tips from the pros.

Identify your strengths. The first step is identifying the subject matter on which you wish to focus, says Jeanne Achille, CEO of The Devon Group, a public relations and communications firm based in Red Bank, N.J. "Ask yourself what you're good at," she advises. "It might be recruitment or enrollment. You've got to start somewhere."

Choose appropriate platforms. Social media platforms such as LinkedIn, Facebook and Instagram have simplified the process for messaging and developing a following. But old-school ways of reaching an audience, including speaking at conferences and submitting articles to respected publications, also can be key to getting your message out, says Aiko Bethea, who runs RARE Coaching and Consulting, an Atlanta-based executive development firm.

Interact with your audience. The days when readers were willing to absorb information passively are long over. Encourage your audience to comment on your posts and start a dialogue. "Comment on other people's posts, but do it insightfully," advises influencer Suzanne Lucas of the website Evil HR Lady. "Your comments have to add to the conversation."

Be consistent. Once you decide on a topic and a point of view, stick with it. And commit to providing relevant content regularly and when expected, says Rocki Howard, a diversity advocate and former recruiter in Jacksonville, Fla.

Be accurate. Nothing undermines your credibility quicker than sloppy mistakes. Don't be shy about asking another expert to check your work for accuracy, advises Lucas, who says she leans heavily on her network of lawyers when writing about legal issues.

Separate messaging from advertising. Sharing expert advice online is a great way to show you're at the top of your game. But pitching a specific product or service—particularly one in which you have a financial stake—will erode your audience's trust. Bethea says she's careful to avoid pitching her leadership training services in her articles and posts. But she acknowledges that having a wide audience is likely a boon for her business. —R.Z.

Minimize your financial exposure. Having an online media presence comes with legal risks that might not be covered by traditional business liability insurance.

Experts recommend that aspiring influencers talk with an insurance agent or attorney to see whether they need to purchase social media insurance or another product to shield against accusations of slander, libel or copyright violations that can catch an influencer off guard.

Talk to your boss. If you have an employer, check its social media policy before you begin posting, particularly if you will be using your own name.

Many influencers acknowledge that the avenue they've chosen may not be for everyone.

Writing blogs or producing podcasts can raise your visibility. But like any other job, it takes time—and a lot of hard work.

Rita Zeidner is a freelance writer in Falls Church, Va.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RESEARCH AT WORK

ANOTHER CHALLENGE FOR PEOPLE MANAGERS

Managers play an important role in supporting the mental health of their teams, and this added responsibility can take a significant toll.

By Ragan Decker, Ph.D.

While inflation may have been the top concern for organizations in 2023, SHRM research reveals that another critical concern emerged as a close second: employee mental health and well-being. As organizations grappled with the complexities of a challenging economic landscape, they simultaneously sought to support workers struggling with hard times. In their quest, organizations turned their attention to a vital asset: people managers.

Gone are the days when managers were solely taskmasters or productivity enhancers. Today, managers play a significant role in mental health support, having become even more influential than health care professionals such as therapists and doctors and mirroring the influence of spouses and partners, according to research by UKG.

This finding, while compelling, is not entirely surprising, given both the significant amount of time employees spend with their managers, and managers' influence on crucial resources, time off, recognition, career advancement and job security. SHRM research shows that managers can also foster a sense of connection, community and growth, which are the top drivers of U.S. workers' overall mental health.

However, as organizations turn to managers as first responders for mental health support, there are implications to be aware of. Only 5 percent of organizations provide managers with training on mental health issues, according to SHRM's 2022 *Mental Health and Belonging* report, leaving them ill-prepared to support employees while maintaining their own well-being.

CARRYING THE LOAD

34% of people managers acknowledged that the mental health struggles of their direct reports have a noticeable impact on their own mental health and well-being.

33% of people managers say that when their direct reports share their mental health struggles with them, they find it challenging to stop thinking about them.

Source: *Perspectives on Effective People Management*, SHRM, 2023.

The very qualities that organizations and employees value in managers—such as empathy, a strong sense of responsibility for their team and a collaborative style—may make them especially vulnerable to the emotional toll exacted by supporting their direct reports who have mental health struggles. Recent SHRM research (*Perspectives on Effective People Management*, 2023) brings this into focus, as 34 percent of people managers acknowledged that the mental health struggles of their direct reports have a noticeable impact on their own mental health and well-being. Moreover, once they know about a direct report's mental health challenges, 33 percent of managers find it hard to stop thinking about them.

The implications also extend into the realm of stress. That same SHRM research showed that a noteworthy 27 percent of people managers feel significant stress when their direct reports share their mental health struggles with them. This is a notable concern, considering that 58 percent of people managers frequently experience high levels of stress in their job.

Managers already bear much responsibility for supporting and leading their teams. If they are to take on this additional duty, it's essential for employers to provide managers with the necessary resources—the SHRM Mental Health Ally Certificate, for example—and support to help them navigate that added responsibility. As organizations embark on initiatives to enhance employee mental health and well-being, it becomes increasingly apparent that the well-being of managers is an integral component of this equation. HR

Ragan Decker, Ph.D., is an industrial-organizational psychologist and manager of commercial research at SHRM.

PINNACLE AWARDS RECOGNIZE EXCELLENCE IN HR

Various SHRM chapters and state councils were honored at the Pinnacle Awards during the SHRM Volunteer Leaders' Business Meeting 2023 in Washington, D.C., in November. The Pinnacle Awards recognized 12 organizations for their hard work and commitment to developing workplace initiatives in their regions. Each winning organization was presented with $1,000 and a crystal plaque.

This year's awards, sponsored by 401(k) Solutions by Raymond James, were given in three categories—Serving the Professional, Advancing the HR Profession and Enhancing the SHRM Community—and grouped by chapter size. The winners were:

SERVING THE PROFESSIONAL

- **Bridgerland SHRM (Utah)** partnered with local businesses to hold a recruiting and retention lunch-and-learn series, where it presented workshops for local HR professionals and business owners.
- **Miami Valley Human Resources Association (Ohio)** developed a program that matches HR mentors with mentees to work on career planning, problem-solving and networking.
- **SHRM-Atlanta (Georgia)** sponsored "Demo Days,' during which 300 HR practitioners viewed broadcast demonstrations that showcased new HR tech advances.
- **Connecticut SHRM State Council Conference** joins the SHRM State Councils of Massachusetts and Rhode Island each year to present a conference that works to advance the HR profession in southern New England.

ADVANCING THE HR PROFESSION

- **Northwest Louisiana SHRM** partnered with Catholic Charities to offer an English-as-a-second-language course to help bridge communication barriers between employers and the area's growing Spanish-speaking population.
- **Birmingham SHRM (Alabama)** trained interviewers to screen, assess, select and place 1,500 volunteers from around the world into jobs supporting the World Games.
- **Salt Lake SHRM (Utah)** created a series of initiatives to advance the HR profession, including increasing awareness about SHRM certification and promoting donations to the SHRM Foundation.
- **Arkansas SHRM State Council's** "Legislative Advocacy Makes a Difference" program educates legislators about important HR-related issues.

ENHANCING THE SHRM COMMUNITY

- **Mid-Hudson HR Association (New York)** became a 100 percent SHRM chapter and joined the dual membership release program, tripling its chapter membership revenue.
- **Green Bay Area SHRM (Wisconsin)'s** annual legal conference, silent auction and vendor fair attracted more than 150 professionals in the Green Bay HR community.
- **SHRM-Memphis (Tennessee)** developed an initiative to create engagement opportunities across all levels of the HR experience to attract larger sponsors and increase membership.
- **SHRM Georgia State Council** created an industry certification program to help improve the workforce readiness skills of students in the program and promote quality business and computer science education.

PAUL SACKETT NAMED 2023 LOSEY AWARD WINNER

Paul Sackett

University of Minnesota professor of psychology Paul Sackett is the winner of the 2023 Michael R. Losey Excellence in Human Resource Research Award. The $50,000 award recognizes Sackett's lifetime contributions to the field of human resources. His academic career began in 1979 and includes teaching at the University of Kansas and the University of Illinois at Chicago. He has been with the University of Minnesota since 1988. Sackett's extensive research and publications include topics such as the assessment of managerial potential and the role of personality in personnel selection.

LINDSEY GARITO AWARDED 2023 MEISINGER FELLOWSHIP

Lindsey Garito

Lindsey Garito, SHRM-SCP, is the winner of the 2023 Susan R. Meisinger Fellowship for Graduate Study in HR. The up-to-$20,000 fellowship is aimed at helping develop the next generation of HR leaders by providing funding for first-time master's degree students in HR. Garito is director of people and culture and head of HR for Westchester Country Club in Rye, N.Y. She serves on the board of the Westchester Human Resource Management Association as its Young Professionals Chair. In 2023, she launched a six-month mentorship program for chapter members, and she is a volunteer mentor in the SHRM Foundation's HR Career Mentoring and HR Talent Accelerator programs.

KANSAS STATE COUNCIL WINS SHRM WORKPLACE IMPACT AWARD

The Kansas State Council of SHRM's HR-Registered Apprenticeship Program (HR-RAP) has been awarded the annual SHRM Workplace Impact Award. The SHRM Foundation launched the HR-RAP in 2021 with support from the U.S. Department of Labor to help emerging HR professionals. The award provides an extra level of recognition to a chapter or state council that creates an initiative addressing untapped talent management. The Kansas State Council was awarded a state grant to fund its apprenticeship program, which has worked with other Kansas SHRM chapters, the state legislature and the Chamber of Commerce to fund individuals interested in pursuing an HR career. Winners of the Workplace Impact Award receive $2,500.

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PHOTOGRAPH BY CHRISTOPHER BEAUCHAMP FOR *HR MAGAZINE*

MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

ANDY THIEDE, SHRM-SCP

HR consultant,
KardasLarson, Berlin, Conn.

Andy Thiede started her HR career in accounts receivable at a small company, helping new employees fill out their benefits forms. As the business grew, the owners encouraged her to create a formal HR department. She attended HR seminars to get herself up to speed and joined a SHRM chapter for guidance.

Today, she's an HR consultant who also works part time managing the operations of three SHRM chapters. In addition, she volunteers as secretary for the Connecticut state council and as treasurer of another SHRM chapter. Passionate about giving back, Thiede has personally funded 11 scholarships for chapter members in need of financial assistance to study for their SHRM certifications.

WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR GREATEST CHALLENGE?

Some employees of the manufacturing company I worked for wanted to form a union. It was a huge HR learning experience! After the union fell short by just one vote, the company defused tension by giving employees more of a voice and by providing a pension to the hourly workers.

WHAT'S THE BEST ADVICE YOU'VE EVER RECEIVED?

When I was caring for my ailing father, my boss told me, "Take all the time you need. This is important." His words were a huge relief, assuring me my job wasn't in jeopardy and reducing my guilt for not being able to give my usual 100 percent during that time. I hope every leader will give that same advice when their employees have similar issues.

WHAT DO YOU ENJOY IN YOUR SPARE TIME?

I volunteer studying migrating songbirds. Twice a year, I go to an island off the coast of Maine and participate in the science of collecting ornithological information. We capture the birds briefly, take measurements, affix a metal band with a serial number to their leg and let them go. If they're recaptured, we can learn things such as their age, sex, weight and breeding condition. The first time I held a bird in my hand, my heart soared!

EXPAND YOUR HORIZONS

If your organization is focusing all of its energy on production at the expense of learning, you're missing out.

By Steve Browne, SHRM-SCP

This is a milestone year for my wife, Debbie, and me: We're celebrating our 35th wedding anniversary, and we're both turning 60 years old. So, we're embarking on an adventure to mark the passage of time and our lives together. We're going on a cruise that will take us through Hungary, Austria, Germany and the Netherlands. It's been fascinating to plan, and we're both already feeling the anticipation grow. To prepare, Debbie challenged me to relearn how to read and speak German.

ILLUSTRATION BY PHIL MARDEN FOR *HR MAGAZINE*

I took up the gauntlet and started daily language lessons using the Duolingo app on my phone. I have to say, I love it! I know I could use Google Translate or some foreign language artificial intelligence bot on the trip instead, but that seems like an easy out.

I wanted to accept Debbie's challenge for several reasons. The first is that it will be cool to be conversant and understand the language and signage that we'll encounter throughout most of our trip. Second, I took German for one year in college, and it was wonderful. My heritage is a mix of German on my mother's side and Irish on my father's side. Also, I was born in Nuremberg, West Germany (that's what it was called back then), on an Army base, where my father was stationed. Finally, one of the stops on the trip is Nuremberg. To be able to speak to people in the city of my birth will be amazing!

There are also untold benefits to being someone who's constantly learning. I've always been a curious person who's more willing than others to take risks. I get itchy if I fall into too many predictable patterns in life. There's always something new you can learn.

Back in the 1990s and 2000s, there was a concerted effort for people to become "lifelong learners." I remember blog post after blog post on the topic. (I probably wrote one or two of them myself.) It's a great aspiration, but many of us learn only when told to, or for a reason. The focus at work is production, and the message of the day is about hitting our numbers, driving results or analyzing data, then coming up with methods to get those numbers consistently better.

I don't think learning and performing are separate functions. Far from it: They're intertwined. We perform far better and more consistently if we take the time to learn first. And we have the time. We just choose to blow through it because of the incessant pressure to produce at all costs. This is a miss—a big miss.

As HR pros, we should be the ones pumping the brakes inside our organizations. We should be intentional about making learning and development part of the fabric of our company culture. And these efforts shouldn't be a one-time program or a reactive response to another inane performance-review list of goals.

Learning, like work, should be continuous. It should flow seamlessly and be encouraged regularly so we—and our colleagues—don't get stagnant and stuck in our ways.

So, be on the lookout for where learning can happen for yourself and others, and then jump in. I'll be looking for those opportunities myself—and continuing my German lessons! 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 Unleashed!!* (SHRM, 2023), *HR Rising!!* (SHRM, 2020) and *HR on Purpose!!* (SHRM, 2017), he has been an HR professional for more than 30 years.