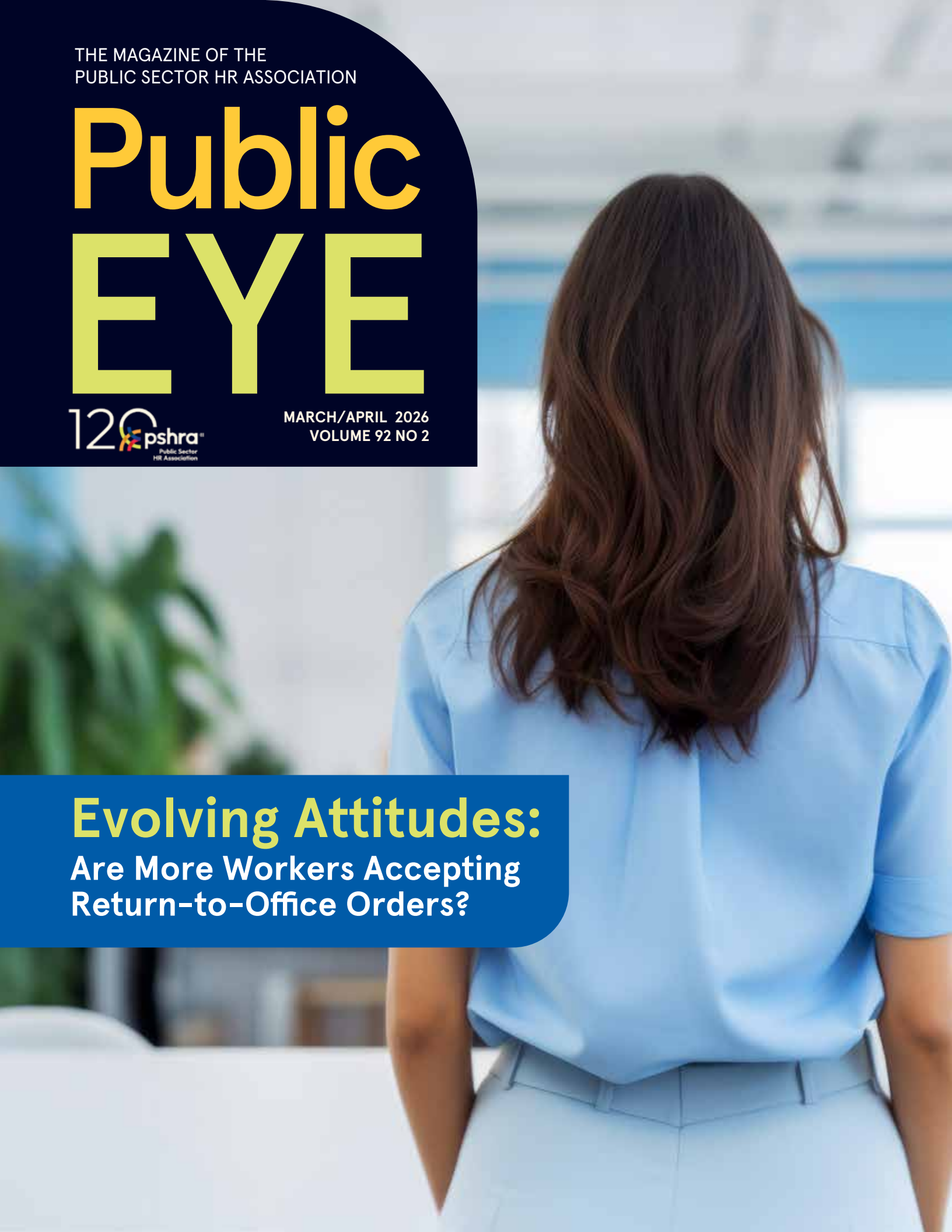


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PUBLIC SECTOR HR ASSOCIATION

# Public EYE

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Public Sector  
HR Association

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VOLUME 92 NO 2



**Evolving Attitudes:**  
Are More Workers Accepting  
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## PSHRA's 120<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Year Rolls On

In the previous issue of *Public Eye*, the first of 2026, we shared some of the [special events and activities](#) we have planned throughout this year, which marks PSHRA's 120<sup>th</sup> anniversary as an organization.

The festivities include our [Anniversary Learning Series](#), a [120<sup>th</sup> celebration at our national conference](#) and our [Stories of Impact: 120 Voices of Public Service](#) series.

The latter highlights the people behind the public sector HR profession, as PSHRA members retrace the career paths that led them to public service, recall what brought them to PSHRA, and share the professional aspirations they have for the future.

Looking over this issue's table of contents, one can find a number of the topics that figure to be on our members' minds in the days ahead.

For instance, our cover story, "Evolving Attitudes," breaks down recent data that suggests a shift in how many employees feel about return-to-office mandates.

In January 2025, MyPerfectResume asked American employees how they would respond to a return-to-office (RTO) mandate from their employer. More than half (51%) said they would quit before complying with such a directive.

One year later, the online resume builder asked the same question, with drastically different results.

In a recent survey of 1,000 U.S. workers, MyPerfectResume found just 7% of respondents saying they would leave their job rather than accept a forced return to in-office work.

Speaking with *Public Eye* for this feature, Melissa Barker, vice president of practice development at Phoenix-based global recruitment firm the Duffy Group, attributed much of the shift in attitudes toward in-person orders to economic anxiety.

"More than ever, employees are prioritizing job security, particularly in an uncertain economy," said Barker, who has special expertise in recruiting for government and public sector organizations.

"As more employees return to the office, it is critical that [employers] have a thoughtful plan to bring people back, including desk-sharing and scheduling so that team members aren't working out of conference rooms, or, worse yet, have no space to work at all."

Navigating this kind of change is no easy task. And this issue's "All About Engagement" finds some employers struggling with change management.

For example, a recent Eagle Poll Consulting poll of more than 1,440 employed U.S. adults found just 25% of respondents saying their organization effectively manages major changes across the workforce.

Melissa Jezior, president and CEO of Eagle Hill Consulting, recently spoke to *Public Eye* about the survey findings, and how HR can be instrumental in ensuring successful change management efforts within an organization.



"Between digital transformation, new workplace technologies, evolving workforce expectations and ongoing economic uncertainty, many organizations are implementing multiple changes simultaneously," said Jezior. "Unfortunately, the way organizations manage change has not kept up with the speed of the change itself."

Noting the need for clear and consistent communication to employees when the agency is undergoing significant transformation, Jezior also offered some advice that rings true during these especially turbulent times in the government workplace.

"HR leaders should recognize that change is not a one-time event, but is an ongoing capability that organizations must build," she said.

"That means investing in organizational resilience, leadership development and workplace cultures that encourage adaptability. When employees trust that leaders are thoughtful and transparent about change, they are far more likely to support it." ●



Mark McGraw  
Editor

## DID YOU KNOW?



In 1938, the Assembly of Civil Service Commissions—the parent organization to PSHRA—shifted headquarters to a new building at 1313 East 60th Street in Chicago. A grant of \$1,160,000 from the Spelman Fund built the building, designed to serve as a center for various autonomous public sector organizations.



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Assessing Your Expertise:  
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# Are More Workers Accepting Return-to-Office Orders?

By Mark McGraw, PSHRA®

In January 2025, MyPerfectResume asked American employees how they would respond to a return-to-office (RTO) mandate from their employer. More than half (51%) said they would quit before complying with such a directive.

One year later, the online resume builder asked the same question, with drastically different results.

In a recent survey of 1,000 U.S. workers, MyPerfectResume found just 7% of respondents saying they would leave their job rather than accept a forced return to in-office work.

“This dramatic decline signals a shift away from worker leverage toward a new phase of employer control—what many are calling the ‘Great Compliance,’” [according to MyPerfectResume](#).

“Workers are bracing for a future that leans more heavily toward on-site work, tighter oversight and reduced bargaining power,” wrote MyPerfectResume’s Jasmine Escalera. “Remote work is no

longer seen as a guarantee. It’s becoming a privilege workers feel they must protect.”

While many workers still want remote work options, the findings suggest that employees are generally more accepting of in-person work arrangements than they’ve been in recent years. For HR leaders, this means being part of the effort to determine the right mix for their organizations going forward.

## Less resistance to RTO

The survey also found 46% of respondents saying they expect organizations to become stricter about requiring on-site attendance in the days ahead, with 73% expecting employers to expand their use of surveillance tools to enforce accountability.

In addition, 44% said they believe that at least half of U.S. employers will have eliminated remote work altogether by the end of 2026.

The trend toward return-to-office directives is not a deal-breaker for many workers, however. For instance, just 33% of respondents said they would look for another remote job. In 2025, 40% indicated as much, according to MyPerfectResume.

“Remote work is being reframed not as a right, but as a negotiated benefit, one that fewer workers feel empowered to defend,” Escalera wrote.

“As job security tightens, companies are reclaiming authority over where and how employees work. For millions of workers, 2026 won’t be about resisting RTO. It will be about adapting to it.”

Melissa Barker, vice president of practice development at Phoenix-based global recruitment firm the Duffy Group, attributes much of the shift in attitudes to economic anxiety.

“More than ever, employees are prioritizing job security, particularly in an uncertain economy,” said Barker, who has special expertise in recruiting for government and public sector organizations.

That said, Barker sees other factors at play as well.

“During the pandemic, working from home was the ‘shiny object.’ As time passed, the allure of working alone has waned. While not [true] in all cases, in general, I think employees are eager to get back to a routine and enjoy the energy and camaraderie that exists in an office.”

## The importance of a thoughtful plan

Employees’ desire to return to an in-person work model is probably a good thing, based on the MyPerfectResume finding that 47% of workers said they anticipate roles to be wholly or mainly on-site as 2026 unfolds. Another 27% said they expect a hybrid model to dominate the workplace in the days ahead.

Finding the right balance between in-person and off-site work is a question that many employers have been wrestling with since at least the start of the coronavirus pandemic. An organization and its HR team have a few variables to weigh, said Barker.

“One of the biggest considerations is physical space,” she said, noting that some employers reduced their physical footprint during the pandemic.

“As more employees return to the office, it is critical that [employers] have a thoughtful plan to bring people back, including desk-sharing and scheduling so that team members aren’t working out of conference rooms, or, worse yet, have no space to work at all.”

Barker also recommends exploring creative scheduling options that benefit staff members. For example, this could include scheduling staff members for four 10-hour days that give them an extended weekend.

Flexible schedules, such as 7 a.m. to 4 p.m. or 7 a.m. to 3:30

p.m. with a 30-minute lunch, might be desirable for, say, workers with children, she said, adding that establishing a mandatory in-office day and scheduling in-person meetings accordingly is another option.

As the organization’s employee relations leader, HR has a duty to set and communicate on-site work policies with executives and managers across the agency, said Barker, adding that line managers should adapt policies based on the needs and roles of their teams.

For example, she said, on-site attendance is different for office workers versus IT staff working at a 24-hour help desk or those in public- and customer-facing positions.

Finally, Barker suggests “selling the benefits of working in the office,” starting with a welcoming, inviting office environment that promotes creativity, teamwork and collaboration.

“Play up the perks in the office,” she concluded, “from comfy couches ideal for brainstorming to coffee bars, stocked refrigerators, on-site gyms and more. Bottom line: Emphasize the positives of the change.” ●

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# Civic Match Connects Displaced Federal Talent with Local Government Jobs

By Michael J. O'Brien

Nathaniel Haight has a much different view on commuting to work these days.

After being laid off in 2025 from his position as an education adviser at the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Haight recently began work as a grant accounting and compliance administrator with the City of Indianapolis.

He found the position with the help of Work for America's [Civic Match platform](#), designed to help former federal workers make the transition to jobs at the state and local level at no cost to either job seeker or agency.

The platform, launched in November 2024 as an emergency Google Form following the announcement of mass federal layoffs, helped Haight see how global program management experience could translate into domestic public-sector impact.

"Driving into work this morning, I was just thinking about how I'm actually living in the community that I'm serving," he said. "It feels great to look out my window to see the impact we're having right outside."

Now, more than one year after [Civic Match](#) was first introduced, new data from Work for America suggests Haight isn't alone: Many federal workers laid off in early 2025 have stayed in public service, moving into state and local government roles where their expertise is urgently needed. And Work for America has upgrades in store that it hopes will make it even easier for displaced federal talent to make the transition to different levels of government.

## A national view

To date, 187 Civic Match candidates have landed roles across 36 cities, 24 counties and 32 state governments, according to Shifra

Goldenberg, chief program officer at Work for America.

"It's really exciting to see our geographic reach expanding," Goldenberg recently told *Public Eye*, adding that new features—including AI capabilities—to the Civic Match platform will help push the platform's boundaries even farther for both affected workers and agencies with positions to fill.

The Civic Match placement data provides one of the only national views into how public-sector capacity has shifted following last year's mass layoffs, and its numbers paint a picture of a workforce in transition.

To date, 187 Civic Match candidates have landed roles across 36 cities, 24 counties and 32 state governments

"State and local governments became the place where experienced public servants chose to keep serving," said Caitlin Lewis, executive director of Work for America. "Our data shows a workforce that stayed committed and governments that were ready to step up."

It found that more than 12,000 public servants have uploaded resumes to Civic Match and accessed job-seeker resources, while 258 city, county and state governments have used the platform thus far. Of those governments that have posted a job opening, one in five have made at least one hire.

And of those hires, nearly two-thirds brought eight years or more of public-sector experience, which helps to underscore the depth of expertise moving into state and local government.



# civicmatch

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## Upgrades on the way

The data found that one in three Civic Match hires relocated to a different state, with 10% moving more than 2,000 miles to continue their public service careers.

Meanwhile, it also found that approximately 40% of hires were in human resources, finance or other key operations roles, which are typically positions that cities and states struggle to recruit for, and that directly shape hiring, budgeting and service delivery.

(Additional placements occurred across public health and human services, education, workforce development and other critical functions.)

Overall, agencies seem to be finding quality matches on the platform, as 57% of hiring managers reported taking at least one active recruiting action, such as posting, short-listing or inviting candidates to apply.

Now that Civic Match has a year of experience under its belt—as well as new relationships with HR departments across the country—Goldenberg says they are using what they've learned to inform new iterations of the platform.

New features to Civic Match will include improved location targeting featuring jobs, cost-of-living and quality-of-life information, she said.

For example, job seekers can express interest more granularly,

targeting “California” or “40 miles outside Los Angeles” instead of just searching “Western States.”

It will also feature city-specific homepages to help candidates understand which roles fit their skills and experience.

The platform will also use AI-powered match scores to make public-sector roles easier to understand, as well as AI-driven job translations and AI-powered job digests for candidates and candidate digests for hiring managers.

Work for America has also [launched a Talent Accelerator program](#) focused on peer learning via a series of virtual workshops designed to allow city governments to “dive deep into their hiring processes in order to identify bottlenecks and communication gaps.”

In the meantime, Haight smiles whenever he sees an office trash can with a Department of Public Works logo on it.

Whenever he sees one, “I think, ‘Those are my colleagues, just a floor away,’” Haight said.

“At USAID, we always talked about localization and finding local solutions,” he said. “Now I get to be part of the local solution, and that’s motivating and inspiring.” ●

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*Michael J. O'Brien is a writer from Glenside, Pa. He can be reached at [mojobrien@gmail.com](mailto:mojobrien@gmail.com).*

# HR's Role in Mastering Change Management

By Mark McGraw, PSHRA®

**A** new survey finds that employee attitudes toward change vary by generation, but workers of all ages seem to agree that many organizations struggle to manage through significant transformation.

In a recent poll of more than 1,440 employed U.S. adults, Eagle Hill Consulting found just 25% of respondents saying their organization effectively manages major changes across the workforce.

This figure suggests that workers of all ages tend to agree that employers aren't excelling at change management. "But beneath this shared concern lie stark generational divides," [according to Eagle Hill](#), in terms of how employees perceive and experience workplace transformation.

Melissa Jezior, president and CEO of Eagle Hill Consulting, recently spoke to *Public Eye* about the survey findings and some of the factors driving employees' perceptions of how their employers handle change management.

## Struggling with consistency

The pace of change inside organizations "has accelerated dramatically in recent years," Jezior told *Public Eye*.

"Between digital transformation, new workplace technologies, evolving workforce expectations and ongoing economic

uncertainty, many organizations are implementing multiple changes simultaneously," said Jezior. "Unfortunately, the way organizations manage change has not kept up with the speed of the change itself."

Too often, she said, change is viewed as a project milestone, "rather than a human experience," with leaders sometimes focusing on launching a new system or announcing a new process.

Meanwhile, "they underestimate the time and communication required to help employees understand the purpose behind the change and how it will affect their day-to-day work," Jezior continued. "When employees feel that change is happening to them rather than with them, it erodes trust and makes adoption much more difficult."

These findings suggest that many organizations struggle with consistency, in terms of managing change initiatives, said Jezior. For instance, change initiatives may be rolled out unevenly across teams, leaving employees unclear about expectations or priorities.

When clear communication, visible leadership support and opportunities for employee feedback are lacking, even well-intentioned changes can feel disruptive or poorly managed, she said.

"Change management is not just about implementation. It's about employee engagement. Organizations that bring employees into the process early, communicate clearly and frequently, and

demonstrate how change connects to mission and outcomes are far more likely to succeed.”

## Accounting for generational differences

The survey also found some significant differences across generations, in terms of how they view process changes within their organizations.

For example, the poll results suggest that Gen Z-age workers are the most optimistic workforce cohort, with 70% of respondents in this age group saying process changes made their organization better. Just 36% of Gen Xers and 45% of baby boomers said the same.

“Change management is not just about implementation. It’s about employee engagement.”

Gen X employees appear to be the most skeptical about change, with just 3% saying that recent return-to-office mandates improved their organizations. Older generations also reported feeling less supported as their organization undergoes transformation. Just 18% of boomers and 20% of Gen Xers said their employers make change easy to embrace.

The generational differences seen in the survey “largely reflect how different cohorts have experienced the workplace over time,” said Jezior. “Younger employees, particularly Gen Z, entered the workforce during a period when rapid change is the norm. They are accustomed to constant updates in technology, workflows and communication tools.”

As such, employees in this age cohort may tend to see change as an opportunity for improvement rather than an unwelcome disruption, she said.

“That helps explain why a strong majority of Gen Z workers in our survey say process changes improve their organizations.”

On the other hand, Gen X and boomer-age employees entered a workplace with more stability, Jezior continued, adding that “processes and structures evolved more slowly, and organizational changes were less frequent. As a result, these workers may view change through the lens of past experiences where change initiatives were disruptive or poorly executed.”

## HR has a key role to play

Across all age cohorts, respondents identified understanding the

reason for changes and effective communication as the two most important drivers of change acceptance.

The survey report also detailed a number of steps for leaders to take to help employees get on board with workplace change. For example, the report suggested “turning Gen Z’s optimism into cross-generational influence, meaningfully engaging more experienced workers who may feel skeptical or fatigued by repeated change efforts, and empowering managers to act as the essential bridge between generational needs.”

HR can play a key role in ensuring successful change management efforts,” because they sit at the intersection of leadership strategy and the employee experience,” said Jezior.

The first step is to make sure that changes are grounded in clear and consistent communication.

“Employees need to understand not only *what* is changing, but *why* the change is necessary and how it connects to the organization’s mission,” she said. “In public sector organizations especially, connecting change to service delivery and public impact can be a powerful motivator.”

Jezior also urges HR leaders to help equip managers to lead through change, noting that frontline supervisors are “often the most trusted source of information for employees.”

Still, managers are not always formally trained in change leadership, she said, adding that providing managers with tools, talking points and coaching “can dramatically improve how change is communicated and adopted across teams.”

HR can also be instrumental in creating opportunities for employee input on change initiatives, which “are more successful when employees feel their perspectives are heard and considered,” said Jezior, adding that mechanisms such as listening sessions, pulse surveys and feedback loops are useful for identifying concerns early and adjusting accordingly.

Finally, “HR leaders should recognize that change is not a one-time event, but is an ongoing capability that organizations must build,” she says.

“That means investing in organizational resilience, leadership development and workplace cultures that encourage adaptability. When employees trust that leaders are thoughtful and transparent about change, they are far more likely to support it.” ●

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## The Town of Bluffton Gathers Invaluable Feedback with Intern Exit Surveys

By Anni Evans

**T**he Town of Bluffton, S.C. places a special value on providing meaningful experiences for our interns. This philosophy is driven directly by our mission statement: “We Take Care Of Our Citizens, The Town And Each Other By Continuously Making Our Community And Organization Better.” In HR, we’ve focused on improving our intern program little by little each year, and we recognized that our interns represent a unique talent segment requiring a specialized feedback loop.

Because interns are not full-time regular employees, a standard exit survey didn’t quite fit their short-term, project-based experience. As the program has matured, we’ve moved away from a model where interns might have focused on errands or filing.

Today, our goal is to ensure they are engaged in high-impact, meaningful work. The primary driver in developing a dedicated

survey was to verify that the Town met their expectations and that they felt the robust nature of the program we are building.

To date, this has become a standard part of the intern life cycle; we’ve had a 100% completion rate with our most recent cohort of eight interns, ranging from high school students to those pursuing graduate degrees.

### Getting the real story

Our HR team led the creation of this survey in April 2025, but it wasn’t done in a vacuum. We collaborated with other departments and researched industry best practices to ensure we were asking the right questions. We centrally administer the survey to ensure a consistent, professional offboarding experience across the organization.

While we offer flexibility via electronic or paper formats, the key differentiator is the in-person meeting we conduct. Sitting down face-to-face with an HR representative provides an opportunity for the intern to discuss their answers in greater detail.

During these meetings, we stress that we value their feedback immensely. We can only grow the internship program if we hear the real story—both the highlights and the constructive feedback. HR then ensures that each department receives this feedback so we can continue to refine the mentorship experience.

In terms of the types of questions we ask on the survey, we're seeking to capture the life cycle of the internship, from initial attraction to future intent. We focus on four key areas:

- **Motivation and Attraction:** We ask what drew them to local government and public service. This helps us refine our recruiting pitches for the next generation.
- **Quality of Experience:** We move beyond “busy work” to ask if assignments were truly meaningful, if supervisors were accessible and if they felt comfortable approaching leadership.
- **Organizational Culture:** It is vital for us to know if they felt welcomed and included. This gives us an outside perspective on how well we are living our mission.
- **The Pivot Point:** We ask if the experience increased their interest in public service. This is the ultimate litmus test for the program.

Ultimately, we want to know if departments successfully provided a real-world-caliber look at public employment, and if our culture was truly embedded into their daily routine.

## Putting the data to work

The data we gather from these surveys is instrumental in proving the tangible value of our program to Town leadership. These insights are a core component of our strategic plan: the launch of a formal Bluffton Talent Pipeline internship and fellowship program.

We have already implemented changes based on recent surveys. For example, our 2024 summer interns suggested an earlier start date to align with their academic calendars. Consequently, we started our 2025 interns in early May, which opened us up to more qualified applicants.

We also launched an inaugural internship networking lunch that included other local public entities. This gave interns the chance to network with department heads and former interns who are now full-time employees. By identifying what resonates with our interns, we ensure the Town remains an employer of choice for future public servants.

At the heart of our efforts is a commitment to the future. By evolving our internship program from a temporary support role

into a meaningful professional journey, we aren't just filling seats for the summer—we are cultivating the next generation of local government leaders.

The feedback we receive through our exit surveys today is the blueprint for the Bluffton Talent Pipeline of tomorrow. As we continue to refine this program, our goal remains clear: to ensure that every intern who walks through our doors leaves not only with a stronger resume, but with a deep-seated passion for public service and a lasting connection to the Town of Bluffton. We are building more than just a career path; we are making our community and our organization better, one intern at a time. ●

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*Anni Evans is the director of human resources with the Town of Bluffton, S.C. She can be reached at [aeans@townofbluffton.com](mailto:aeans@townofbluffton.com).*

## SAVE THE DATE!

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# Addressing Gender Transition in the Workplace

By Amanda Glynn Hecker

Being a transgender person can be complicated. But developing a very general understanding of who trans people are is easy and straightforward. This basic understanding is based on having knowledge of just a few terms.

When a baby is born, for example, the doctor assigns it a sex that is based on the babies' genitalia. Usually, this is very clear, but not always. This is called their *sexual assignment*, and is something that everyone has.

As a person grows, they develop a sense of their *gender identity*. This is a feeling of who they are and how they feel about themselves and the things that they enjoy. This starts for everyone at a young age and can continue throughout their lifetime.

If a person's sexual assignment and gender identity match, they are considered *cisgender*. The prefix "cis" is Latin for same. This situation describes most people. However, there are some people whose sexual assignment and gender identity do not match. They are called *transgender*. The prefix "trans" signifies change.

Whether or not we realize it, people express their feelings, likes and dislikes through their appearance and actions. This is called *gender expression*.

So, if you were assigned female at birth and enjoy being female, you are most likely cisgender and probably prefer acting and appearing as a woman.

If you were assigned female at birth, but something about it

doesn't feel right, you may be transgender or a member of the gender-diverse community. In this case, it may be more natural for you to act and appear as a man. Naturally, the same scenarios pertain to someone assigned male at birth.

In the workplace, understanding these terms, and ensuring the work environment is open and accepting of transgender individuals is critical, and HR leaders have an important part to play in creating this type of atmosphere.

## Setting standards for behavior

In terms of what HR leaders and co-workers throughout an organization need to know in terms of "how to interact with a transgender person," it really depends on the nature of what the organization does.

Ideally, trans folks would not need any special attention or consideration at all. Naturally, this assumes that the people within the organization understand the five terms explained above. Most trans people have a basic desire to be seen and treated just like any other employee.

That said, social biases are usually not left at home when a person comes to work. Therefore, it is incumbent on the organization to state in its employee policy manual what type of behavior is expected when a worker is on the job.

Before a trans person is hired, it is important to proactively review



this handbook and make any changes deemed necessary before the new hire comes on board. Employee training will almost certainly be necessary, not just to explain the company's policies, but to inform and educate the people involved.

When these steps are taken, transgender employees generally work out well. However, when they are not taken, the failure rate will most certainly be higher than normal. Workplace friction must be monitored, controlled and adjudicated by a person who is informed and knowledgeable of trans issues. If such a person does not exist within the organization, an outside consultant should be sourced.

... it is incumbent on the organization to state in its employee policy manual what type of behavior is expected when a worker is on the job.

## Addressing common questions

From an HR standpoint, human resource managers don't usually have many specific questions regarding transgender workers. General questions regarding policy and practice are much more common. Specific questions occur when an organization did not prepare its personnel for the hiring of a diverse person and now needs to enact damage control measures.

That said, there is an understandable hesitancy to hire transgender applicants. Just like any applicant, their desirability depends on their qualifications, personality, experience and the needs of the company.

HR departments generally have a good handle on the needs of the organization and are skilled at evaluating the other aspects of the applicant. They also usually understand the many advantages of having a diverse workforce.

But it might be the ramifications of having a trans employee that they fear. Quite often, HR managers think that hiring a trans person will open an avoidable can of worms. Why throw a stone into a calm pond?

Fears of this nature are alleviated by implementing the preparations I've already outlined. An informed workforce operates much more smoothly. The working environment also benefits when employees know that they have a process by which they can confidentially ask questions, express concerns and/or complain about a person or situation without fear of punishment or reprisal.

The only specific questions that occur from the get-go are issues of bathroom and locker room usage. In reality, these are two entirely separate issues. While OSHA is specific about the requirements

for availability and use of these semi-private facilities, actual implementation can be problematic. This is mostly because existing physical structures were often built before OSHA guidelines existed.

## Overcoming reservations

So, what to do?

In my opinion, bathrooms are easy and shouldn't even be an issue. People oftentimes have preconceived and unfounded fears regarding using the same bathroom as a transgender person. But these fears almost always disappear once everyone gets accustomed to working with the trans person. Eventually, bathroom usage will revert to a near normal level. However, there are a variety of techniques that can be employed should a worker express a continued hesitation to share a lavatory facility.

If an organization requires that employees change clothes or shower to perform their job, locker room facilities will need to be provided. This can be a sticky situation when a transgender person is introduced. However, having people of two different sexes change clothes in the same area is usually possible, depending on the floor plan of the changing area and the unbending need to ensure privacy for everyone.

On the other hand, showering together draws a line that even the most understanding people hesitate to cross. But even this hurdle can be overcome with common sense and understanding. Policies such as separate shower rooms, variable changing times and so on can be implemented.

It must be stated, though, that forcing the transgender employee to use the facility that aligns with their sex assigned at birth is never an acceptable solution. All accommodations must obviously be based on the physical limitations of the facility.

Ultimately, employing gender-diverse people can prove to be very beneficial. Sometimes, it can even be fun, once everyone gets to know each other. The more comfortable workers get with each other, prefixes like "cis" and "trans" become much less relevant and much less important. ●

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*Amanda Glynn Hecker is a retired teacher who has provided diversity training and education since leaving the classroom in 2014. Amanda is also a transgender woman, one of roughly 2.8 million individuals in the U.S. who identify as transgender. She can be reached at [amandaglynn1@gmail.com](mailto:amandaglynn1@gmail.com).*

# Young Workers Willing to Leave Over Lack of Wellness Support

By Mark McGraw, PSHRA®

New research suggests that more than half of **millennials and Gen Z-age employees** would be willing to leave their current employer if they felt their personal wellness went unsupported in the workplace.

A recent study from Mather Institute sought to assess the views of “Gen Z, millennial, Gen X and baby boomer generations’ workplace satisfaction, loneliness, wellness, stereotypes and trends,” **according to the institute**, which serves as the research arm of Mather, an Evanston, Ill.-based nonprofit focused on helping older adults age well.

The survey of roughly 4,000 employees across these four generations found 61% of millennials and 59% of Gen Z-age workers saying they would change jobs if they felt their employer was not supportive of their personal wellness. In comparison, 41% of Gen Xers and 26% of boomers said the same.

Overall, the data suggest that younger workers prioritize wellness support when evaluating employers, and that Generation X-age employees—generally defined as those between the ages of 46 and 61—can be a key player in helping these (and other) co-workers manage stress and stay engaged in their jobs.



The researchers noted that this cohort has “the potential to serve as the bridge in a multigenerational workplace,” adding that employers might be failing to notice their “unique capability” to help others manage stress, enhance social connection and lead multigenerational collaborations.

“This research comes at a pivotal time when Gen X is playing a vital role in the workplace yet [feels] overlooked,” said Jennifer

## Study Links Expanded PTO to Lower Turnover Rates

Part of providing the well-being support that employees need is giving them the paid time off they need to recharge their batteries. A new study finds that doing so may just help organizations hold on to their workers for the long haul.

**In an analysis** of 18 years of data and more than 32,000 observations, researchers from Florida Atlantic University and Cleveland State University assessed how paid time off (PTO) influences voluntary turnover.

For the analysis, the researchers explored “not only PTO’s overall impact on resignation, but also how different amounts affect early-career men and women over time,” revealing what they say is a “clear pattern.”

For example, organizations that offered just one to five days of PTO saw only “modest reductions” in quitting, with “no mean-

ingful effect” when men and women were analyzed separately.

Those providing between six and 10 days off, however, saw significantly fewer resignations, especially among men.

“The evidence is clear: policies that offer only five paid days off simply don’t go far enough,” said study co-author LeaAnne DeRigne, Ph.D., **in a Florida Atlantic University statement**.

“... Our data show that the strongest retention benefits occur well above those limits,” said DeRigne, professor in the Phyllis and Harvey Sandler School of Social Work within FAU’s College of Social Work and Criminal Justice.

“If policymakers and employers want to keep workers, they need to recognize that meaningful time away from work isn’t a luxury—it’s a proven strategy for stability.”

Smith, assistant vice president, director of Mather Institute and lead of the Gen Xperience study, in a statement.

“They are deciding now how they will age well in the next chapter of their lives while remaining with their current employers. Companies are investing in wellness programs that aren’t resonating with Gen X, a generation key to the success of their employers,” Smith continued.

## Offering recommendations

The study also found younger workers feeling more strained at work. When asked to rate their current level of work-related stress, 29% of millennials said they were very or extremely stressed, with 24% of Gen Zers indicating as much. More than half of Gen Z employees (52%) reported feeling somewhat stressed, as did 48% of millennials.

Gen X respondents—22% of whom said their jobs have them feeling very or extremely stressed—are in a unique position to understand the demands placed on younger workers as well as the career transitions facing their boomer colleagues, according to the researchers.

As such, Gen X employees could be “strong mediators in facilitating discussions on workload and stress management,” the researchers wrote. The study authors also offered a number of steps employers can take to better support and retain Gen Xers, who could in turn help organizations retain talent across other age groups.

For example, the researchers suggested making fair and transparent advancement opportunities available to Gen X employees, and supporting their “sandwich generation” life stage needs. The study authors also recommended targeted retention strategies for Gen X workers, and, ultimately, valuing the role these employees can play as a liaison with their younger and older colleagues.

“The study shows how Gen X is uniquely able to understand workplace dynamics across all generations—and how younger and older employees are more alike than stereotypes suggest,” said Mather Chief People Officer Dominice LaPorte, in a statement.

“Employers should recognize the value of this unique generation, which has successfully adapted to rapid social and technological changes and brings untapped potential to the workplace.” ●

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## PONDERING THE GENDER PAY GAP:

# What's Really Driving Disparities?

By Robert Greene and Peter Ronza

Anyone with a sense of fairness and a desire to comply with U.S. laws and regulations views paying men more than women solely because of gender as wrong.

Yet the statistical pay gap that receives continuous attention creates suspicion that the difference is due to unwarranted discrimination against women. “Men are paid X% more than women in the U.S.” is an annual measure announced by the federal government agency responsible for labor statistics. Minute changes in the gap are viewed as good or bad news, depending on the direction of change.

There are problems with the pay gap statistics. The first is that it is an aggregated measure that does not consider what causes the gap other than gender. This aggregation ignores factors such as occupation, competence relative to role qualifications and performance relative to role standards.

## Determining value

Some occupations command higher pay due to supply and demand balance in the labor markets. Some occupations are viewed as less valuable to organizations than others. Some organizations pay high performers more than those performing at a lower contribution level. Principles underlying sound pay management demand these factors be considered because they are likely to impact workforce effectiveness.

The second problem is that the gap triggers emotions that may be the result of past pay discrimination. The historical existence of illegal and unethical discrimination based on personal factors is an indisputable reality. People have been unable to enter many roles in organizations based on personal criteria. Subjective beliefs, such as women are not physically capable of being firefighters, prohibits access to that occupation.

Denying promotions to women because of beliefs that they will leave to have children presents another blockade that may not be warranted. If someone has experienced pay discrimination because of their gender, age, color, ethnicity or other irrelevant factors, they will be predisposed to suspect the pay gap is the result of unwarranted discrimination.

When the organization cites the criteria that determine pay rates, the explanation is often met with skepticism. Although most people can understand and accept that organizations must utilize sound business practices when administering pay rates, perceptions may suggest otherwise.

The pay gap is much smaller when occupation, competence and performance are considered. The Equal Pay Act only covers differences when the two genders represented are “similarly situated.”

Although some state legislatures have tried to use the concept of “comparable worth” to address gaps by passing laws or regulations, it has been shown to be infeasible. The idea that occupations are universally valued relative to each other in all organizations is fanciful. Software firms will value IT specialists more than accountants, while accounting firms will assign contrasting relative values.

Yet the attempt to demonstrate something is being done to cope with discrimination, even if it is designed by people lacking even a basic understanding of sound pay management principles, can be politically appealing.

## Considering root causes

What does research indicate is behind the pay gap?



Recent research studies that are scientifically valid have suggested that most or all of the gender pay gap is due to the reality that women sustain the population through childbirth while men do not.

There are penalties that accrue to most women who become mothers while pursuing a career. Breaks in employment can reduce the rate at which a woman would otherwise progress in her career. The subjective view that every woman employed will become a mother, which will lead to departure or extended parental leave, can influence who is promoted.

It would be exceedingly difficult to determine if subjective opinions about what women are likely to do result in penalizing women. So, there has been a limited amount of society-wide discourse about whether laws or regulations could remedy this potential source of discrimination.

Moral persuasion is unlikely to result in organizations modifying the career management and pay systems they utilize. Employment quotas based on gender, race and other personal factors have been implemented to increase fairness for all people. The inevitable result has been claims of reverse discrimination.

Since some women will become mothers while others may not it makes the idea of quotas even more daunting to consider. Personal characteristics are quantifiable, making the use of quotas at least possible to administer objectively.

## How we deal with inequity

So, if childbearing creates most or all of the gender pay gap, then what should be done?

This question must be addressed at a societal level. There is no

“right” answer. There is no clear remedy. Yet, from a woman’s perspective, the current reality lacks the fairness this country has worked to increase. Private sector organizations are unlikely to submit to algorithms that specify how female pay rates should be administered to ensure childbearing does not produce a certain economic penalty.

What should happen during the societal dialogue is that unwarranted claims of unfairness based on invalid statistical measures (e.g., the “pay gap” based on over-aggregated statistical measures) should cease.

Using analytics to compare “similarly situated” employees should be used. If there are systemic differences even after these factors are adjusted for the unexplained differences, then that should result in challenging organizations to administer pay in a non-discriminatory manner.

The most challenging issue to address is the impact of childbearing on women’s economic and career success. There should be dialogue aimed at deciding how society deals with all types of inequities. Ignoring an issue of this magnitude is a sign of a culture that does not produce fair treatment of all citizens. ●

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# Using AI to Take on the HR Analytics Challenge

By Wayne Birch

Job classification remains one of HR's most consequential yet inconsistently executed processes. Despite its direct impact on FLSA compliance, compensation equity, workforce planning and employee trust, most organizations still rely on manual review by individual HR professionals—each bringing different experience levels, contextual knowledge and decision heuristics.

At scale, this approach creates operational bottlenecks, inconsistency and audit exposure. At Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS), these challenges were acute: 435 employees held “Specialist” titles across 24 pay grades, creating salary compression, retention risk and persistent classification appeals. A June 2025 pay equity analysis concluded that sustainable reform required a standardized, scalable classification approach grounded in explicit decision criteria.

Recent advances in large language models (LLMs) suggest automation potential, but naïve single model implementations fall short of enterprise requirements. A single classification output offers no insight into confidence, ambiguity, financial risk, or when human review is warranted. HR leaders require decision intelligence—not just predictions.

These circumstances led to the development of PRISM (Progressive Refinement & Intelligence Synthesis Model), a staged hybrid architecture that adapts multi-model AI principles—most notably Andrej Karpathy's LLM Council—into a domain-specific system optimized for HR classification.

Rather than relying solely on parallel model consensus, PRISM combines iterative refinement with structured validation to support risk-aware, auditable decision-making.

## A staged hybrid approach

Karpathy's LLM Council demonstrated that multiple AI models working together outperform single-model systems through parallel querying, peer review and synthesis. PRISM builds on this insight, but applies a different architectural pattern optimized for enterprise HR use cases. For example, using the PRISM framework:

- **Karpathy Council:** Parallel multi-model querying → peer critique → synthesis



- **PRISM:** Iterative single-model refinement → parallel multi-model analysis and validation → independent multi-model audit → cross-model narrative synthesis

This staged hybrid approach separates deep analysis from independent validation, aligning with HR's need for consistency, transparency and governance rather than open-ended deliberation. Central to this design is what we term *architected friction*—the deliberate introduction of structured analytical checkpoints that prevent the system from converging too quickly on a single answer.

Where a naïve implementation would produce one classification in a single pass, PRISM forces the model through multiple distinct lenses, each designed to surface a specific category of error—scope inflation, technical misalignment and supervisory ambiguity, that the previous pass may have missed. The result is a system that delivers at scale what would otherwise require months of manual review—without sacrificing the rigor HR professionals expect from human classification and compensation decisions.

PRISM's primary classifier uses a single foundation model (GPT4o) in a fivepass iterative refinement pipeline. Each pass is executed as a separate API call with distinct analytical intent, allowing cumulative reasoning rather than probabilistic averaging.

- Pass 1 – Initial classification
- Pass 2 – Self-consistency verification
- Pass 3 – Strategic scope and role elevation review

Pass 4 – Technical role disambiguation

Pass 5 – Supervisory role clarification

This structure emerged empirically through error analysis, which showed that common misclassifications stemmed from distinct failure modes best addressed through targeted analytical lenses rather than additional training data alone.

## Multi-model validation and risk intelligence

Following primary classification, PRISM applies six independent validation components. Two operate as true multi-model ensembles using different foundation models; others use specialized analytical logic optimized for their function.

**Component 1: Analyst**—Generates plausible alternative classifications, serving both validation and job description quality diagnostics.

**Component 2: Likelihood Judge**—Produces a likelihood of error score based on human baseline error rates, ambiguity signals, consensus failures and KSAC semantic similarity.

**Component 3: Cost Accountant**—Quantifies financial exposure associated with potential misclassification, incorporating salary differentials, benefit load, asymmetric risk weighting and administrative correction costs.

**Components 4 and 5: External Auditors**—Two independent models (OpenAI GPT4o and Anthropic Claude Sonnet) classify roles without access to PRISM outputs, providing unbiased ensemble validation.

**Component 6: Narrative Synthesizer**—Integrates outputs from all preceding stages into a unified risk-informed analysis for each position, using a separate foundation model (Meta Llama 4 Maverick) to ensure cross-model objectivity in final reporting.

Disagreement between auditors and the primary classifier automatically escalates review priority, mirroring how independent consulting reviews are used in high-risk HR decisions.

Expert HR professionals independently classified a representative sample of positions, achieving 82% interrater agreement. This established a realistic performance ceiling for any classification system, human or AI.

Against this benchmark, PRISM achieved 76% to 79% accuracy across test and production-validated samples. Importantly, residual variance reflected genuine professional judgment rather than systematic model failure.

Production deployment revealed a critical insight: a significant majority of positions exhibited legitimate classification ambiguity due to organizational role design, not AI error. PRISM successfully distinguished the minority of clear, low-risk cases from those requiring human review, enabling risk stratified workflows.

From an HR practitioner standpoint, there are a number of factors that must be considered. For example, AI classification systems

should prioritize risk stratification over raw accuracy.

Iterative refinement is necessary to address failure modes that additional training data cannot. Multi-model validation is most valuable when applied selectively, not universally. Financial impact analysis transforms model output into executive-relevant decisions. And transparent and auditable reasoning is essential for HR adoption and trust. Organizations without explicit classification criteria should standardize first; AI will otherwise amplify existing ambiguity.

## HRIS integration implications

PRISM is designed to function as a decision-support layer rather than a system of record, aligning with HRIS governance best practices. In its current deployment, classifications are exported via structured files for human approval prior to HRIS updates, preserving auditability and change control.

For HRIS leaders, the architectural implication is clear: AI classification engines should integrate upstream of position management workflows, not replace them. This pattern enables scalable analysis, risk stratification and financial impact modeling while maintaining HRIS integrity, approval hierarchies and compliance safeguards. Over time, APIs can automate ingestion of approved classifications, but only after governance thresholds are met.

Beyond simple integration, the API enables risk-tiered routing: “Auto-Approve” decisions can flow directly to the HRIS draft stage, while “Critical Risk” flags are automatically routed to a specialist’s queue. This ensures the HRIS remains a system of validated record, not just a repository for automated outputs.

As public sector HR organizations modernize in response to growing complexity and public accountability, governance-first approaches to AI adoption are becoming essential. PRISM demonstrates that staged hybrid architectures, combining iterative refinement with multi-model validation, offer a viable, governance-aligned approach to AI-assisted HR classification. By integrating confidence scoring, financial risk, and independent validation, PRISM moves beyond automation toward decision intelligence.

For HR technology leaders, the key lesson is not model selection, but architectural intent. Systems should surface uncertainty, prioritize human judgment where it matters most, and scale responsibly. PRISM provides a replicable framework for achieving these goals at modest cost while maintaining professional accountability.

*The author wishes to thank Dr. Charreau Bell of Vanderbilt University's Data Science Institute for her expertise in AI systems and contributions to the development and validation of the PRISM multi-model validation architecture and framework. ●*

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# ● MEET THE MEMBER

## Susan Thornton: Supporting Employee and Organizational Success

By Mark McGraw

Susan Thornton's human resources career began in healthcare, where she quickly recognized how critical HR leaders are in supporting both organizations and the individuals who provide essential services to their communities.

Thornton, now the human resources manager for the City of Goldsboro, North Carolina, recently sat down with *Public Eye* to discuss her more than 20-year career in human resources, what first drew her to the profession, and what led her to her current role with the City of Goldsboro.

**Public Eye:** Your HR and HR-related experience spans more than 20 years and includes a significant period of time spent in the public sector and education. You also hold a bachelor's degree in management and organizational development from the University of Mount Olive. What initially attracted you to the HR discipline?

**Thornton:** I began my career in human resources in the healthcare field, where I quickly saw how HR plays a critical role in supporting both employees and organizational success. That experience gave me an early appreciation for how HR helps organizations attract, support and retain the people who provide essential services.

My interest in the field deepened when I later worked in workforce development as a counselor with Johnston County Job Training. In that role, I worked closely with individuals seeking employment and career advancement and saw firsthand how meaningful employment can positively impact individuals, families and communities.

As my career progressed, including my time as a human resources analyst with Johnston Community College, I became increasingly drawn to the strategic and people-centered aspects of HR. The opportunity to support employees, develop policies and help organizations build strong workplace cultures is what has kept me passionate about the profession for more than 20 years.

**Public Eye:** What led you to your current role with the City of Goldsboro?

**Thornton:** My time serving in consulting roles within the City of Goldsboro allowed me to focus on specialized areas of human resources. As an HR consultant focusing on benefits, and later as a senior HR consultant working in areas such as performance management, policy development and compensation, I had the



opportunity to support a variety of initiatives that strengthened the city's workforce.

When the opportunity arose to step into the Human Resources Manager position in June 2025, it felt like a natural progression. This role allows me to take a broader leadership perspective and work closely with city leadership and employees to shape HR strategies, strengthen programs and continue supporting the workforce that serves our community.

**Public Eye:** What are some of the biggest challenges facing you and your HR team at the moment, and how are you taking on these challenges?

**Thornton:** Like many public sector organizations, recruitment and retention remain among the biggest challenges we face. The labor market continues to be competitive, and local governments must find ways to attract and retain talented employees while balancing fiscal responsibility and public service priorities.

Our HR team is focusing on strengthening recruitment strategies, enhancing employee engagement and supporting leadership and professional development opportunities. We also work closely with department leaders to foster a workplace culture where employees feel valued, supported and equipped to serve our community.

**Public Eye:** What sort of hobbies and interests keep you busy away from the office?

**Thornton:** Outside of work, much of my time is dedicated to my involvement with the PSHRA North Carolina Chapter. I currently serve as a member of the PSHRA NC Board and hold leadership roles as Sponsorship Committee Chair and Chapter Achievement/Recognition Co-Chair. I'm also honored to be preparing to serve as President-Elect for the 2026–2027 term.

Being actively involved with PSHRA NC has provided me with meaningful opportunities to collaborate with HR professionals across the state, support professional development initiatives, and strengthen relationships with our partners and sponsors.

I especially value the relationships I have built through the PSHRA NC Conference. The friendships, mentorship, and professional connections I've gained through the chapter have been some of the most rewarding aspects of my professional journey.

I also enjoy working closely with our sponsors and partners, including Civic, TrueComp and many others, whose support plays an essential role in the success of our chapter programs and events.

Beyond my involvement with PSHRA, I stay engaged in leadership and community initiatives and currently serve as President of the Wayne County Leadership Class of 2025–2026. I am also working toward completing my Master of Business Administration.

Most importantly, I enjoy spending time with my family. I'm the proud mom of three boys—Jacob, Caleb, and Isaac—and I'm excited to soon become a grandmother, as our family will be welcoming a baby girl in August 2026.

Serving in PSHRA has been an incredibly rewarding way for me to give back to the public sector HR profession, support the growth of our members, and contribute to strengthening the organizations and communities we serve across North Carolina. ●

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## Evaluating the Credibility of Research

By Robert J. Greene, PhD

“According to research” accompanies many claims. But what research? Done by whom? And how was the research conducted? Is it reliable and scientifically sound?

There is currently a considerable amount of skepticism about the quality of some research, even studies appearing in academic journals. How a research study is designed is the principal factor in determining its scientific validity. Doing a survey of employee opinions, for instance, qualifies as research, but it only summarizes what people believe to be so.

If gathering employee feedback was the overarching goal in this case, then there is nothing wrong with using that feedback to guide decisions. For example, an organization may want to know if replacing a defined contribution pension plan with a defined benefit plan will be accepted by employees. If the average response is neutral, it could be taken to mean employees really do not care, and making the change will not result in dissatisfaction or loss of valuable talent.

But if a significant sample of respondents strongly disliked the idea and a similar number said they would welcome it, the average is misleading. Only by doing an analysis of response frequencies can the real opinion profile be understood. When analyzing data, the level of aggregation must be appropriate for the results to be useful.

The current focus on pay equity has made organizations mindful of the factors that result in pay rates. The federal government publishes statistics that indicate “males are paid x% more than females on average.” On the surface, that suggests there is illegal and unethical discrimination based on gender that is rampant and significant.

There are two major mistakes when that conclusion is reached based on that number. The first mistake is that it is a measure of *pay parity* and not of *pay equity*. The second is that it aggregates data on employees who are not similarly situated. Professional engineers are paid more than administrative support personnel, and software designers are paid more than coders.

By not adjusting for occupational differences, the aggregated statistics mislead. Further, someone who is more competent in a role (e.g., senior engineer) would be expected to be paid more than someone entering the occupation.



Finally, someone performing at high levels would also be expected to be paid more than someone just meeting minimum standards. Failure to adjust the data to factor out these causal factors renders the analysis useless for determining whether *pay equity* exists. Valid comparisons must be based on similarly situated subjects.

Academic studies must follow a pattern to be valid. One or more hypotheses are formulated, and the study must then confirm the “prediction.” If the data is analyzed first and it suggests something might be true based on correlation, the validity is questionable. With the emergence of AI, the danger of questionable findings is increasing.

Ultimately, research can be a valuable source of evidence that can inform decisions. But the research must be relevant and valid. Claims abound in the practitioner literature that lack valid evidence to support them. Opinions of “experts” may be a source of valuable information, but they must be evaluated to ensure they can be trusted. Practitioners must identify and evaluate all forms of evidence that can contribute to making optimal decisions. ●

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