Keeping Pace:

How to Support Today's Workforce With the Right HR Tools

Ashutosh Garg
Eightfold AI, Founder and CEO

The last few years have seen major shifts in the needs, realities, and expectations of workers. These changes affect workers across all classes, industries, job types, and geographic locations. As workers feel the pressure of a changing world, their approach to work changes — and these rapid changes can leave HR teams feeling confused as to how to reach workers whose needs and priorities have evolved.

There are clear patterns of worker expectations emerging. Data analysis and research are painting an ever-clearer picture of what workers' needs are, which best practices meet those needs, and how HR teams can implement the right technologies to support those best practices.

The New **Realities of Work**

Work is changing. So are the ways workers and employers think about work, and what their relationships with that work should look like.

The COVID-19 pandemic changed priorities for millions of workers and job seekers. It also accelerated changes that were already underway in the workforce. Companies seeking to return to business as usual post-lockdown have found themselves surprised by these changes, and baffled as to how to respond.

The Reality Behind the Great Resignation

News coverage paints a bleak picture of the job market today. Businesses struggle to fill job openings while millions of workers remain unemployed. It's a conundrum that has left companies understaffed and seeking answers: Why are so many workers quitting their jobs, and where is the talent to replace them?

While the media narrative is bleak, it's also simplistic. The Great Resignation isn't as simple as people simply choosing not to work, or employers choosing not to make changes to encourage workers to return. The reality is more complicated than that.

Three main factors are driving the current workplace upheaval:

> **People want better jobs and more meaningful work.** They're leaving jobs not to abandon the workforce, but to find work that offers better pay, better benefits, and improved working conditions. Workers want the financial security and working conditions that allow them to focus on producing meaningful results.

> **Companies weren't prepared for a mass shift in worker priorities.** The pandemic changed millions of people's perspectives on the meaning of work in their lives and the way work should be arranged. Workers today are seeking the arrangements they want for themselves, yet too few employers are prepared to make the right accommodations because they don't fully understand what has changed.

> **The skills gap remains an ongoing challenge.** The skills gap predates the pandemic, but the pandemic made it more difficult to close. A 2021 survey conducted by the Society for Human Resource Management found that nearly 60 percent of organizations can't find people with the skills they need to fill open positions, while 30 percent of job seekers indicate available jobs don't match their skills or interests. This disconnect is another reason why roles continue to go unfilled. The talent exists, but companies are struggling to find it.

The Worker Priorities That Have Shifted

There's a growing gap today between what workers are looking for and what employers offer. In many cases, this is causing frustration for both parties. Workers don't understand why employers refuse to offer what they want, while employers don't understand why workers aren't attracted to the same offerings that drew them in a few short years ago.

Today's workers are motivated when they have meaningful work, opportunities to do that work well, and a clear career path.

Health, Wellness and Well-Being

The pandemic made health and safety a top global priority. Millions of people upended their lives in the interests of protecting their health and well-being.

As COVID-19 continues to circulate, wellness and well-being continue to be priorities for workers. These workers and candidates expect employers to prioritize health and wellness, too.

Organizations must address all areas of employee wellness — physical health, mental health, and financial health. What does that look like for each area?

> **Promoting physical health** means ensuring employees have safe and healthy work spaces, creating and communicating health guidelines, and rewarding employees for caring for their physical health.

> **Encouraging mental health** includes openly discussing mental health in the workplace, reducing the stigma surrounding the issue, establishing employee assistance programs, and supporting employees' efforts to get help with addressing mental health issues.

> **Supporting financial health** entails compensating employees fairly for the work they perform, offering relevant benefits such as paid time off and childcare provisions, and incentivizing participation in retirement savings plans.

When companies focus on these issues, they demonstrate to workers that they value employee well-being. This gives them an advantage over other employers in retaining current talent and attracting new candidates.

Remote Work Options

A healthy work-life balance has become particularly important to workers during the pandemic. Many were pushed into working remotely while offices were closed, and many enjoyed the consequent flexibility.

Now, many workers are looking for jobs that allow remote and flexible work. "Workforce flexibility is really becoming table stakes," says Sona Manzo, Managing Director at Deloitte Consulting. "Our research has shown this is a key attribute to charting the new worker-employer relationship that can help turn the 'Great Resignation' to the 'Great Reimagination.'"

Transitioning many roles to a permanent remote or remote-option format, however, requires attention and planning from employers.

Healthy and Supportive Workplace Cultures

Workplace culture plays a big role in employee satisfaction. With so many options available to employees, companies need to focus on creating positive employee experiences that feed an employee-centric workplace culture.

A positive experience isn't merely about making employees feel good. It's about building a culture that acknowledges people's contributions, provides a clear and meaningful vision, and makes their efforts sustainable in the long term.

A healthy and supportive culture begins with onboarding. Employees who don't feel supported during the onboarding process are less likely to believe they'll receive the necessary support to do their best work throughout their careers. Those employees are more likely to leave in search of an employer who offers that support from the start.

A Vision for the Future

The volatility that workers experienced during the pandemic has left them more concerned with the future of their careers. They are looking ahead not only to their career possibilities but also to the skills they will need to succeed in future roles. They want employers to provide them both.

Career mapping and opportunities to upskill and reskill have become major selling points for job seekers. The current role matters, but so does its connection to future roles and responsibilities.

"We sometimes underestimate how much people really want and crave new learning and new ways of doing things," says Julie Hiipakka, Deloitte Vice President and Learning Research Leader.

This is good news for employers, but it also requires employers to partner with their employees in order to realize the benefits of this newfound hunger for learning and growth.

Navigating Careers: The Three Things Employees and Candidates Want

Job seekers and employed workers both have different expectations and desires than they did just a few short years ago. The change is clear, but the reasons why are murky.

To shed some light on employee and candidate expectations, we surveyed 913 employees, including 424 working in white-collar positions and 278 in blue-collar roles.

This "Future of Work: Intelligent by Design" research shows that three factors are important to people and contribute heavily to their job satisfaction: clarity in the application process, opportunities for promotion, and effective performance reviews.

A Clear Application and Interview Process

One of the most important factors among respondents was a clearly defined job application and interview process. According to our poll, 70 percent of workers rated a clear application and interview process "extremely important" or "very important." Another 19 percent said a clear process was "somewhat important."

Yet job seekers often find that their need for clarity here goes unfulfilled by employers. Only 57 percent said they were "extremely satisfied" or "very satisfied" with their application and interview experiences. And 11 percent said they were "not at all" or "not very" satisfied with these experiences.

Transparent Career Development With Real Opportunities for Promotion

A clear application process also lays the groundwork for clarity in the career development process, another quality that workers want but don't always get from employers.

A "transparent promotion and career development process" was rated "extremely important" or "very important" by 70 percent of the poll respondents. Another 20 percent considered it at least "somewhat" important to have a clear career path and to understand promotion opportunities in their work.

Once again, workers' priorities don't match workplace realities. Only 53 percent of respondents said they felt "extremely satisfied" or "very satisfied" with their present reality. And 17 percent described themselves as "not at all" or "not very" satisfied.

Workers want to know how they can move forward in their careers, and they want employers to provide guidance and standards by which they can learn, grow, and take on new or additional responsibilities. Worker growth has profound benefits for employers, yet workers aren't getting the opportunities they want to do the work required to realize these benefits.

Effective Performance Reviews

When performance reviews provide clear, effective feedback, workers know what to do in order to reach their next career development milestone.

Once again, 70 percent of respondents considered effective performance reviews "extremely" or "very" important, even though only 54 percent are "extremely" or "very" satisfied with the performance reviews they've received. One-quarter of respondents (25 percent) were only "somewhat" satisfied with their past performance reviews, and 14 percent were "not very" or "not at all" satisfied with the feedback they received via the performance review process.

Performance reviews provide a unique opportunity for managers to work one on one with each member of the team. Done well, these reviews allow managers and team members to collaborate on individual skill-building and career growth. Done poorly, performance reviews leave valuable skills and effort on the table — and leave workers feeling dissatisfied with their work and their leadership.

These three expectations share one theme: clarity. Workers no longer have patience with opaque decision-making processes. They want to understand how decisions are made. Today's technologies offer new opportunities for transparency and involvement in the decision-making process for both companies and candidates.

How to Meet **Workers' Expectations of Clarity**

For human resources professionals and leadership, the last few years have been deeply confusing. Hiring practices and processes that produced solid results a few months or years earlier suddenly stopped working. It was as if an entirely new group of employees and candidates had emerged — and whatever it was they wanted, they weren't telling.

Research like our recent poll has helped to shed a light on what candidates and employees expect. Now, it's up to HR executives and their teams to shed light on the entire process, from the initial application to long-term career development.

With the right approach and the right technologies, human resources leadership can forge productive and lasting relationships with today's job seekers and employees.

Clarity in Hiring

Candidates place great importance on a clear application and interview process. Their tolerance for mysterious applicant tracking system results, hidden timelines, and "don't call us, we'll call you" indifference from hiring managers is at an end.

Here are the things HR executives can do to meet candidates' expectations for a clear hiring process.

Better Candidate Experiences

The candidate experience encompasses every aspect of the candidate's connection to your company, from their initial curiosity about a job posting to the job offer. Clarity at each step boosts candidates' confidence in the role and employer. It also helps ensure that new hires aren't unpleasantly surprised by the details of the role once they begin work.

To promote a better, clearer candidate experience:

> **Create an application process map.** Outline each step, along with the expected timeline for each. How long does the applicant have to complete the application? How long should they expect to wait for a response? Who can they contact with questions?

> **Streamline the application process.** Once, employers had to ask for a wide range of details from candidates. With the rise of AI and interconnected technologies, however, it's possible to learn more with less. Focus on the details you need most, and look for platforms that allow for deep data analysis to provide additional information.

> **Communicate regularly.** Keep applicants up to date with automated emails, as well as other ways to communicate.

Even before the pandemic, job seekers were prone to abandon lengthy application processes. A 2016 study found that 60 percent of job seekers had walked away from an online job application when that application turned out to be too lengthy or complex.

Unfortunately for employers, the candidates most likely to walk away aren't the apathetic employees. They're the passive candidates performing well at their current jobs, but curious about other options. A short, clear application process captures their attention and encourages them to build a new relationship with your company.

Better Job Descriptions

Confusing, vague, or outdated job descriptions lead to a host of problems for both employers and candidates. When a job description doesn't clearly describe the work to be done:

> Applicants who aren't suited for the actual role are more likely to apply.

> Applicants well-suited for the actual role are less likely to apply.

> Hiring managers may have difficulty finding candidates who can actually perform well in the role, despite multiple interviews.

> A hired candidate may leave quickly upon realizing the job they thought they applied for is not the job they are actually asked to do.

Many job descriptions, even today, are obsolete because they were created years in the past — when the role looked different, when the company had a different set of priorities for that role, and when the best skills for achieving the role's responsibilities were different.

The right technologies, however, can automatically update job descriptions to reflect the skills and tasks involved in a role as it's being performed today. These updated job descriptions help applicants connect with roles that fit their skills and help hiring managers choose among qualified candidates.

Skills-Based Hiring

Every work role is, at its core, a set of skills directed toward a particular goal or set of goals. Often, the skills required are defined by and shaped around the goals to be achieved.

Workers whose goal is to answer customer questions and resolve problems, for example, need skills that equip them to achieve those goals. Those include the ability to listen actively, ask thoughtful questions, and navigate company data and structures in order to refer a customer to the person who can solve the problem.

In the past, however, hiring only targeted skills in a roundabout way. Tracking dozens of individual skills among dozens or hundreds of candidates is a mind-boggling job for humans.

To solve the problem, HR professionals developed shorthand methods for evaluating skills. A college degree, for instance, was accepted as shorthand for a defined set of skills the degree holder could reasonably be expected to have acquired in the process of receiving the degree. A job title was accepted as shorthand for the skills required to meet the expectations of that particular role.

When HR professionals had only their own human analysis skills to rely upon, looking at degrees, job titles, and other signifiers of potential skill sets helped HR teams manage the vast quantities of data present in every set of resumes. Over time, however, HR executives have come to realize that shorthand credentials like degrees and job titles aren't entirely reliable.

Worse, these categories omit skills that overlap even when the degree name or job title is very different. Workers in food service and workers in customer service, for example, share many of the same skills, such as the ability to communicate effectively with diverse customer audiences, to organize information, and to facilitate connections. Yet an HR professional whose only information about a candidate is a string of roles in food service might not immediately see how those skills overlap with customer service call center work.

Today, HR teams don't need to rely solely on human processing power to understand skill relationships at work. They can also rely on analytics powered by artificial intelligence and machine learning.

These tools provide valuable insights into how skills are related and which specific skills are needed for specific roles. With a clear view of essential skills, HR teams can look for candidates who have the necessary skills — and skip details like degrees or job titles that only indicate the candidate might have those skills.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

When it comes to diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts, candidates and employees will no longer accept mere promises that an organization "is committed to" or "is working on" DEI efforts. They expect to see results.

What do clear DEI results look like? Research by Lever indicates that clarity in this area may be expressed through the following best practices:

> Accommodations, opportunities, and tools for workers to succeed, tailored to workers' individual needs, abilities, learning styles, and more.

> Flexible work policies, including remote work.

> Equality in employee pay across titles and positions.

> Expanded benefits and perks, such as gender-neutral paid family leave.

> Revising employee handbooks, training materials, and recruiting and application materials to use inclusive language.

Candidates and employees notice when an employee handbook or application packet excludes certain groups or makes stereotyped assumptions via language. They also notice when benefits and work are structured in ways that make stereotyped assumptions, such as the assumption that someone will be home to pick up children from school or to handle mid-day appointments and errands.

For HR executives, the same tools that allow for skills-based hiring can also help build better diversity, equity, and inclusion on teams. Skills-based hiring removes traditionally segregated factors like a college education from consideration. Data analysis at the individual level helps managers target each worker's needs on the job for more effective accommodation, opportunities, and work arrangements.

Clarity in **Career Progression**

Employers who create job postings or seek candidates do so because they have an urgent need. A position is open, and its responsibilities must be fulfilled so the entire organization can function at its best.

Employers who focus only on their own immediate need miss two opportunities:

> **>** They overlook essential learning skills and potential in candidates.

> **>** They miss a chance to sell their top candidates on a career, not merely a role.

Employers may be looking to fill a role. Candidates are looking to build a career. Offering clear career progression connects these two perspectives.

Career Mapping

A new hire walks in the door. Where do they go from here?

Many traditional companies and roles had clearly defined career paths. A new hire started in their new role, then worked their way up through management, into leadership, and so on.

Today, the traditional career map is often a poor reflection of the territory. Many companies have career paths that aren't traditional. Employees may work their way into adjacent roles, into additional areas of specialization, or into roles that did not exist when they were first hired.

Workers are keenly aware of the need to develop new skills and grow in their careers. Worldwide, about 40 percent of workers believe their current job will be obsolete in five years, according to a PwC study.

Candidates and employees are aware of the fragile nature of their current roles. They want to work with employers who understand the pace of change and who support workers' efforts to improve their skills and move along a career path that suits their evolving abilities.

Skills Analysis on Your Existing Teams

Workers want career maps. They also want options in career mapping. If a traditional path into leadership doesn't appeal to them or is cut off by evolving technologies and industry demands, workers want the ability to use their developed skills to pivot in a new direction.

To meet this expectation, HR executives and teams need information about the web of paths that stretch out from any given role. Once again, deep analytics powered by artificial intelligence and machine learning can provide insight.

Skills analysis provides unique insights when applied to each of the following groups:

> **Current employees.** What are your workers doing right now? What skills do they use? How do seemingly unconnected roles overlap in shared skills? Which skills are workers using less, and which skills are being exercised more than ever?

> **Alumni.** When your past employees left, where did they go? Which skills were put to use in the new role? How were those skills developed while on your team?

> **Candidates.** What skills do today's job seekers bring to the table? Where did they acquire these skills? When current and past employees came to the job with similar skills, how were they able to grow effectively, and into which roles?

> **Past applicants.** When applicants seek to be considered for a role, what skills do they come to the application with? Why might applicants believe those skills are a good fit with the role, and where are they right (or wrong)? Which adjacent skills offer fertile ground for training applicants?

Skills turnover is happening faster than ever, across all industries. The top skills your teams use today won't be the top skills they use in just a few years. AI-enabled skills mapping and data analysis can help you imagine new possibilities for employees and candidates, provide clear career guidance, and spot the skills your teams will need in the near future.

Clarity in **Performance Reviews**

Performance reviews provide a one-on-one chance for managers to work with each employee. A manager-employee team can work together to better understand role responsibilities, measure performance, and set goals.

Many workers are frustrated with the performance review process, however. When leaders don't bring helpful information to the table, workers may feel as if a performance review is just a formalized chance to lecture about everything the worker did wrong over the previous year, with no instructions for how to do better next time.

To improve clarity in performance reviews:

> **Use data to better understand roles and responsibilities.** What do people in each role really do every day? What challenges do they face that aren't covered in the job description? Why does the role exist? What roles, processes, and goals depend on this worker meeting each responsibility? By analyzing role-related data, managers and workers both gain better insight into what's really important day to day.

> **Use data to describe performance measurements.** Many companies have used quantitative measures to track performance for years. When AI-powered analytics are applied, this data can produce profound insights on the most impactful and meaningful measures of performance — and which skills drive that performance. Managers and workers can use this information to create a plan for reskilling, upskilling, improvement, and career growth.

Unclear performance reviews can make employees feel stuck in their current roles or unwanted by their employers. Insightful, data-driven performance reviews allow managers and employees to work as a team to understand the role, make a plan, and bring meaning to daily work.

Heads Up, Eyes Forward:
Into the Future of Hiring

The past few years accelerated an already-rapid pace of change. The COVID-19 pandemic pushed companies and workers across the globe to learn new technologies, to rethink how work is organized, and to implement tools and processes in new ways. For millions of workers, the pandemic also created time and space to reconsider key priorities.

One thing workers now prioritize is clarity. When people apply to new jobs, they want to know what the role is. They want clear communication regarding the application process. They want to see a clear career path and support for their efforts to follow it. They want to work for employers who believe in and are transparent about their diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts.

These expectations and needs don't arise from nowhere. They are a direct response to workers' experiences with the shifting realities of recent years. Understood clearly, worker expectations also provide opportunities for employers to meet their own needs by connecting to candidates and existing staff in new ways.

Technology provides an inflection point. Deep data analysis powered by artificial intelligence can help HR executives gain new insights and provide the clarity candidates want. By using this technology to power best practices, HR leadership can create business-critical advantages at a time when other organizations are struggling to orient themselves to the new realities of work.

About Eightfold AI

Eightfold AI's market-leading Talent Intelligence Platform™ helps organizations retain top performers, upskill and reskill their workforce, recruit talent efficiently, and reach diversity goals. Eightfold's patented deep learning artificial intelligence platform is available in more than 100 countries and 20 languages, enabling cutting-edge enterprises to transform their talent into a competitive advantage. For more information, visit www.eightfold.ai.

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