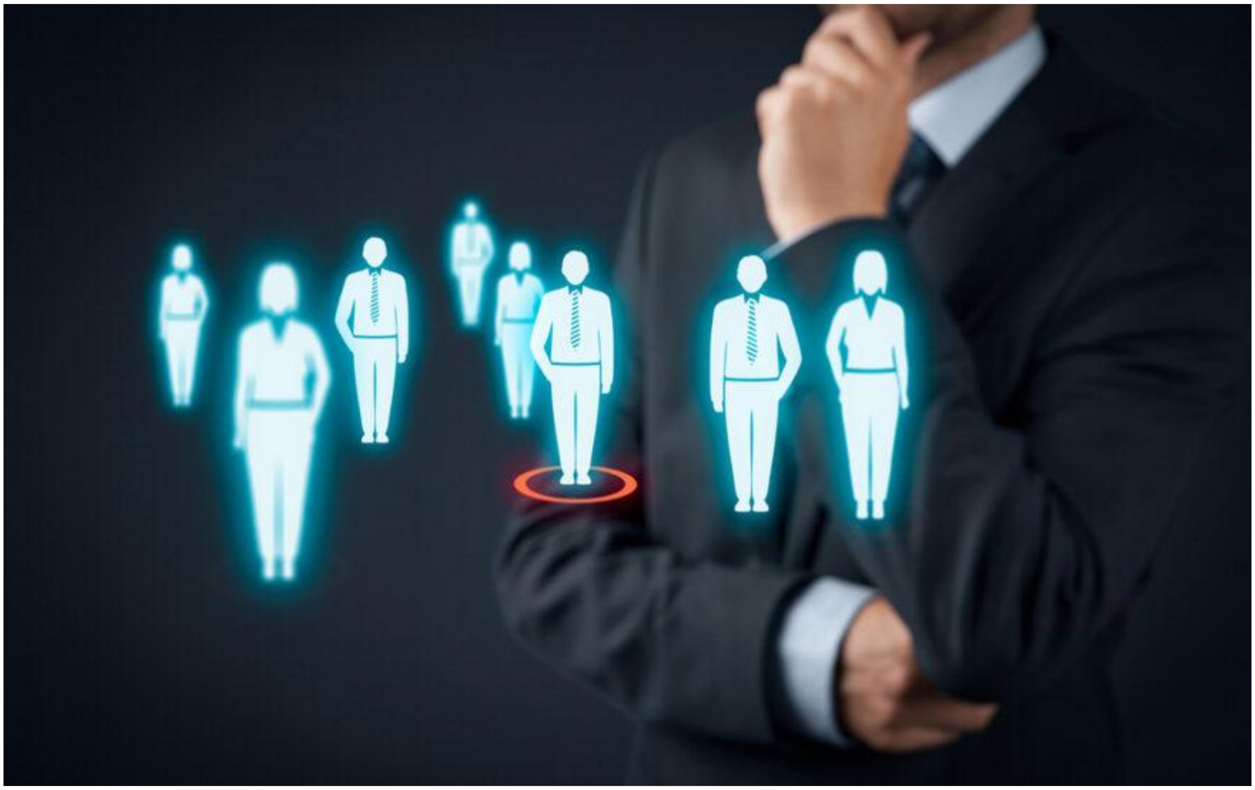

Rochester workforce leaders discuss evolving labor market challenges

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Summary:

- Nicole Bryant emphasizes aligning people strategy with business goals
- Marc Simmons highlights leadership as key to employee retention
- Mason Argiropoulos notes shift to skills-based hiring and personalization
- SimcoHR expands reach to 17 states through remote work

As the labor market continues to evolve, employers are rethinking how they recruit, retain, engage and develop employees while planning for future workforce needs. RBJ spoke with four Rochester-area workforce leaders about the challenges they're seeing and what's helping organizations build a more resilient workforce.

Building a strong foundation

Nicole Bryant

“I think the biggest workforce challenge right now is that employers are trying to build stability in a labor market that keeps changing,” said Nicole Bryant, vice president of client experience at OneGroup.

Bryant said many organizations initially believe they have a single workforce challenge, whether it’s recruiting, turnover, compensation or compliance. But she believes those issues often point to a broader question: What business problem is the organization trying to solve, and what kind of workforce is needed to support where the organization is going?

Rather than relying on a single initiative, Bryant said resilient organizations align their people strategy with their business strategy. That may mean developing future leaders, strengthening onboarding, improving manager communication, reviewing compensation practices or creating more consistent HR processes.

“A resilient workforce is not built from one program,” she said. “It’s built when the people strategy actually supports the business strategy.”

That mindset has also changed the way organizations hire, Bryant said. Rather than simply posting an opening and hoping the right candidate applies, employers are taking a more deliberate approach by evaluating whether a role is structured correctly, compensation aligns with the market and an existing employee could be developed to fill the position instead.

“Candidates are also looking at the full picture,” she said. “Compensation matters, but so do flexibility where it makes sense, communication, culture, growth opportunities, and whether the organization feels stable and well-run. Recruiting today is really about alignment: matching the needs of the business with the expectations of the workforce.”

The same intentional approach extends to retention. Bryant said employers making the most progress are focusing on the day-to-day employee experience rather than one-time retention initiatives.

“Pay is important, but it’s rarely the only factor,” she said. “Employees are much more likely to stay when expectations are clear, communication is consistent, managers are effective, and people understand how they fit into the organization.”

Retention is further strengthened when employees see opportunities for growth, Bryant said, and know their concerns will be addressed fairly and consistently. Building trust through strong onboarding, regular feedback, leadership development and clear communication helps create a workplace where employees want to stay.

“Keeping a resilient workforce means building trust before there is a problem,” she said.

Looking ahead, Bryant said employers should prepare for three major workforce priorities: leadership development and succession planning, workforce structure and process improvement, and the thoughtful integration of new technologies. Even as technology continues to improve efficiency, she said organizations will still depend on strong leadership, sound judgment and clear communication.

Leading with purpose

For employers, today’s labor market is an exercise in balance, according to Marc Simmons, founder and CEO of SimcoHR. Companies must compete for workers with specialized skills while also meeting employees’ growing expectations for strong leadership, communication and workplace culture.


Marc Simmons

“I think it’s really a convergence of two things pulling in opposite directions,” Simmons said.

Employers continue to struggle finding qualified talent, particularly in manufacturing, health care and technical trades, where specialized skills take time to develop. At the same time, he said employees have become more discerning about where they choose to work, placing greater emphasis on meaningful work, transparency and opportunities to grow.

Those workforce shifts have also reshaped recruiting, Simmons said. Rather than simply filling open positions, employers are taking a more strategic approach by identifying candidates who can contribute quickly while also strengthening the organization over the long term.

“I think recruitment has gone from a transactional perspective to more of a strategic,” he said. “We’re looking for people that have the expertise, the technology, and the market intelligence to help the company quickly.”

Remote and hybrid work has also expanded the talent pool, allowing employers to recruit well beyond their local communities. SimcoHR, for example, now serves customers in 17 states, a reach made possible in part by technology and flexible work arrangements.

While recruiting remains important, Simmons believes leadership has become the greatest differentiator. Employees are increasingly choosing organizations where they feel supported, valued and connected to their work rather than basing decisions solely on compensation or benefits.

“I don’t think employees really leave employment for benefits and financial as much as they are starting to really lean on employers to help build culture, build safety, build a place where they can become their best,” he said.

Simmons said those priorities become even more important when budgets and staffing are tight. While compensation and benefits remain important, he believes organizations that invest in leadership development, maintain open lines of communication and provide regular feedback are better positioned to keep employees engaged.

“Clarity, communication, consistency of leadership,” he said, “are the qualities that help organizations reduce workplace friction and build stronger teams.”

Looking ahead, Simmons expects employers to contend with a growing wave of retirements while continuing to address persistent skills gaps. He said organizations that invest in training and leadership development today will be better prepared to meet tomorrow’s workforce challenges.

Investing in people

Today's employee experience is becoming increasingly personalized, requiring employers to rethink how they recruit, engage and retain talent, according to Mason Argiropoulos, chief human resources officer at Paychex.


Mason Argiropoulos

"One of the biggest challenges I see employers facing in today's environment is balancing employees' need for flexibility with companies' increasing needs for productivity while maintaining employee engagement," Argiropoulos said.

Employees increasingly expect more personalized work experiences, including flexibility in where and how they work and benefits tailored to their individual needs, he said. At the same time, organizations are working to build consistent workplace cultures, strengthen employee connections and improve performance amid rapidly changing market conditions.

Successfully balancing those priorities requires employers to continually evaluate how workplace policies, communication and support systems meet both business objectives and employee expectations.

Argiropoulos said hiring has also evolved as employers embrace technology and place greater emphasis on skills rather than conventional credentials.

"I've seen hiring become even more technology-enabled, data-driven, and candidate-centric," he said. "Companies are also placing greater emphasis on skills over more traditional credentials like specific experience in a role or function."

Candidates are also evaluating employers more holistically, Argiropoulos said, weighing workplace culture, flexibility and career growth alongside compensation and benefits. As a result, organizations must think differently about how they position themselves and build their employer brand. Employers that can clearly communicate their workplace culture and growth opportunities are increasingly better positioned to attract qualified candidates in a competitive market.

Retention, meanwhile, depends on making meaningful investments in the employee experience throughout an employee's career, he said.

“The biggest difference organizations can make is in making dedicated and visible investments in employee experience, which has to look at every employee touchpoint,” Argiropoulos said.

Those investments extend beyond competitive pay and benefits to include onboarding, training and development, career progression, communication, workplace technology, employee well-being and opportunities for regular feedback. He said every interaction employees have with an organization contributes to their overall experience and can influence long-term engagement and retention.

Looking ahead, Argiropoulos expects artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies to continue changing how work gets done. While the future impact of those technologies will continue to evolve, he said employers should prepare for changing job responsibilities by investing in AI adoption and helping employees continuously develop new skills.

“I would further emphasize the importance of employee experience since engaged employees are generally also resilient employees,” he said. “Companies that regularly listen to their employees, respond to their feedback, and continue to invest in their people will best position their organizations for sustained success.”

Preparing for what's next

While employers continue to face hiring and retention challenges, the conversation has shifted from simply filling open positions to developing a workforce equipped for rapid technological change, according to Dave Seeley, chief executive officer of RochesterWorks.

Dave Seeley

A few years ago, employers were primarily focused on finding enough workers, Seeley said. Today, the challenge is finding candidates with the appropriate skills while helping current employees continue developing new ones as technology evolves.

“I think it’s really finding workers with the right skills,” Seeley said. “AI is really the new automation.”

That shift comes as the available labor pool remains constrained. The U.S. labor force participation rate, the share of people ages 16 and older who are working or actively seeking work, fell to 61.5% in June, its lowest level outside the pandemic since 1976, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Seeley said employers can no longer expect workers’ skills to remain relevant for years without continued development. Instead, organizations need to think beyond hiring and invest in building the capabilities they’ll need in the future.

“I think an employer needs to be able to look at a pool, a labor market, and determine, where is the skilled labor that we can hire but also continue to develop?” he said.

Retention strategies have also evolved, Seeley said. While competitive wages remain important, organizations are finding that employees increasingly value opportunities to build skills, clear career pathways, supportive workplace cultures and transparency about what they can expect as employees.

Employers that are intentional about creating that experience are more likely to achieve stronger long-term retention, he said.

Seeley pointed to Rochester-based optics manufacturer Optimax as one example, saying the company has strengthened retention by focusing not only on hiring but also on the overall employee experience and thoughtful human resources policies. He said organizations are increasingly recognizing that investments in job quality and workplace culture are not simply employee perks but sound business practices.

Looking ahead, Seeley expects artificial intelligence to continue reshaping the workplace, making continuous learning increasingly important for both employers and employees.

“I think employers need to understand what those AI skill sets are that continue to make them competitive in an industry and how they can transfer those AI skill sets to both new and incumbent workers,” he said.

He also noted that a recent analysis found the percentage of entry-level job postings referencing AI skills had increased from about 11% to 33% in just six months, underscoring how quickly employer expectations are changing.

Seeley believes preparing employees for change starts within an organization itself. At RochesterWorks, the nonprofit recently asked its 70 employees to identify workplace challenges and opportunities for improvement, leading to new initiatives around communication, employee well-being and organizational culture.

“Having an open two-way communication street that is honest but also puts employees in a position where they can really affect organizational change is paramount today,” Seeley said.

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