

Emerging HR Trends In 2026

15Five | Genevieve Michaels | December 22, 2025



New year, fresh start—and for HR leaders, a chance to shape what comes next. As we step into 2026, you're probably asking yourself the same questions many of your peers are: Which trends from last year actually stuck? What's coming that I need to prepare for? And most importantly, how do I turn all this change into real wins for my people and my business?

2025 taught us a lot. AI went from being the shiny new thing to just another part of how we work. Conversations around workplace flexibility and employee wellbeing moved from nice-to-haves to must-haves. And HR leaders like you proved once again that when businesses need to adapt, you're the ones making it happen.

But the organizations that thrive aren't the ones chasing every trend. They're the ones that pick the right battles, focus on what their people actually need, and turn insights into action. This guide is about helping you cut through the noise to find the trends that will make a real difference for your teams in 2026.

Key takeaways:

- HR technology is a core driver of strategic growth
- Skills-based hiring is reshaping recruitment
- Employee experience is a business imperative

- DEIB has evolved from an initiative to an embedded strategy
- Flexible and hybrid work models are now standard
- Upskilling and reskilling are essential retention tools

Need an ally in adapting to these trends? See how 15Five's Perform platform can help you detect and act on trends within your own organization.

HR technology trends are accelerating

HR departments are rapidly experimenting with, implementing, and encouraging adoption of more tools, more quickly, and with greater impact. Chief among these technological trends is AI. The time of AI tools being used to write quirky poems for onboarding new employees or sneakily adopted by individual employees is over. According to Gartner, the percentage of HR leaders in the latter stages of GenAI implementation (i.e., conducting pilots, planning implementation, or already implemented) rose from 19% in June 2023 to 61% in January 2025.

HR departments that haven't already implemented AI are rapidly being left behind. In 2026, the differences between organizations that have implemented AI and organizations that haven't will be massive.

But AI isn't the only technology trend your HR department needs to capitalize on.

Analytics and data are becoming a vital part of HR processes. No longer are employee engagement initiatives and performance reviews relegated to ad-hoc processes and instinct. Forward-thinking HR professionals use tools like 15Five's Perform platform to turn engagement surveys, performance reviews, and other initiatives into data that can validate and optimize their strategy.

Furthermore, as the tool stack HR professionals rely on grows, so does the need to consolidate data from multiple disparate systems into a single platform. Once the realm of software developers and other technical departments, integrated systems are becoming a priority for HR teams as well.

Skills-based hiring gains momentum

If your job postings still prioritize college degrees and years of experience, you might be missing out on potential top performers. Over a third of Americans have at least a Bachelor's degree. Median tenure has decreased from 4.6 years in January 2014 to 3.9 years in January 2024 (according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics).

Additionally, almost 90% of job seekers in the U.S. have worked a side hustle, according to Express Employment Professionals data. The experience gained in these side hustles is rarely represented in a CV or adequately valued by resume scanning tools. Combined, these factors make college degrees and experience less effective for finding the right applicant.

That's why skills-based hiring is gaining so much traction.

Skills-based hiring prioritizes a candidate's skills and abilities over their educational background or years of experience. It's why skill assessments are becoming a much larger part of the hiring process and why tools like structured interview platforms, AI-driven assessments, and skill-matching algorithms are becoming essential. According to TestGorilla, 85% of employers use skills-based hiring practices rather than traditional methods.

HR professionals are valuing the ability to accurately gauge a candidate's skills rather than using degrees and experience as a representation of them.

This impacts your recruitment strategy, but it also has wider implications. DEIB (diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging) objectives are deeply tied to your recruitment efforts, and trends that refocus recruitment on skills and ability over access to higher education can only improve your DEIB efforts.

Employee experience and engagement are strategic priorities

It's almost reductive to say that the job market was rocky in 2025. Trends like quiet quitting and the great resignation have largely blown over, replaced by signs of a tightening market and increased anxiety for employees. Job seekers need an average of 42 applications before landing a single interview, while companies receive an average of 250 applications for a single job posting.

So where employees might have been looking for any opportunity to jump ship only a few years ago, many are now less likely to scroll through job listings at the office. That said, this brings increased expectations for HR as employees seek to improve their situation at their current job rather than switching companies.

This increases the pressure on employers to improve employee experience throughout the organization. In a nutshell, this term describes the thoughts, feelings, and opinions employees have about their work and your company, which affects everyone in your org chart, from junior collaborators to leadership.

And since employee experience impacts everything from recruiting to employee retention and performance, it'll become more of a priority. Combined with the increasing emphasis on data and analytics, HR teams will get a better picture of employee experience in quantifiable metrics—and with this will come an expectation to improve this strategically.

The same will be true for employee engagement.

DEIB: From initiative to infrastructure

There is no doubt that DEIB (diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging) initiatives have a measurable impact on organizations and the people who work within them. According to the Pew Research Center, a majority of workers believe that DEI-related policies and resources have had a positive impact on their workplace. McKinsey data confirms this, with diverse, inclusive companies being 35% more likely to outperform the competition.

DEIB is shifting from an objective, attained through individual initiatives, to a foundational strategy. DEIB isn't something tacked on as a new responsibility; it's becoming part of your organization's DNA.

This includes everything from using more inclusive language in job postings to making performance evaluations more equitable through calibrated feedback and building DEIB dashboards that track metrics across gender, race, and tenure.

Here, the increasing shift towards advanced HR technology will make building your DEIB infrastructure much simpler. HR teams will have better data around DEIB initiatives and strategy, which will in turn lead to stronger strategies.

The future of work is hybrid and highly personalized

The days of the cubicle are long over. But despite the pandemic-era opinion pieces from dozens of CEOs claiming that remote work is the future and that office work is an outdated artifact of a bygone era, many of the world's largest organizations and trend-setters have returned to the office at least some of the time.

According to a 2024 survey from WTW, 61% of US companies have return-to-office mandates that require at least a few days in the office each week. However, only 4% require four in-office days a week.

The future of work might not be completely remote, but it is undoubtedly hybrid. That means HR teams have to learn how to navigate commonly cited issues with hybrid work, like coordinating tasks across disparate departments, handling Zoom fatigue, and maintaining company culture. Their responsibilities will shift with the way the organization works, which will require adaptation in tools, strategies, and more.

Hybrid work is just one half of this trend, another being a push towards highly personalized workplaces. Cookie-cutter, overly corporate benefits and workflows won't cut it in 2026. Between the personalization inherent in hybrid work and the increased pressure on your employee experience strategy, you'll need to build tools that allow you to better adapt roles to each employee's work style and expectations. That can impact feedback cadences, work schedules, and more.

Learning and development gets a reskill-focused makeover

Lopsided job markets, skyrocketing hiring costs, and lower average tenures will force organizations to promote from within, either by upskilling or reskilling their workforce. According to the World Economic Forum, 1.1 billion jobs will be radically transformed by technology in the next decade. While you might not see the full impact of this shift before the end of this year, you need to start building a foundation to prepare for it.

Reskilling and upskilling are no longer optional. Building these functions into your organization helps retain top talent, reduce hiring costs, and even avoid expensive restructuring by supporting employees in building the skills they need to stay relevant.

This trend is already manifesting in the following ways:

- Self-guided learning platforms, like Coursera and LinkedIn Learning, are becoming more popular among employees, and finding their place in training offered by employers.
- Microlearning and just-in-time training give employees important skills and knowledge as they become necessary, allowing both trainers and trainees to work with more agility.
- Structured mentorship programs allow organizations to support their workforce's upskilling needs while leveraging their network to save on training costs and infrastructure.
- Learning and development are becoming crucial to career advancement, helping to guide employees as they build up their careers. Additionally, they can contribute to performance metrics and reviews, giving both employees and managers a way to track progress over time.

HR's strategic role in business resilience

For too long, HR departments have served a primarily administrative function, handling processes to maintain the organization's compliance and reacting to issues as they arise. But an increased access to technology, better data, and a broadening role in strategic aspects of the broader organization are all heralding a shift from administrative to strategic.

What does that look like in practice? HR teams can expect the following:

- Sitting at the table for more decisions: HR professionals will become key strategic partners, and leaders in other business functions will expect them to contribute to broader organizational strategy with real-time data.
- Scenario planning for talent: Organizations will need more robust models for their current talent pool and the potential gains (or losses) they might see as their needs change. HR will be expected to produce scenarios that help leaders make better decisions around this.
- To become the key strategic partner they need to be, HR leaders will need to learn to rely on data, the tools that generate that data, and improve their ability to work with that data.

How to keep up with HR trends

If you feel like any of these trends are catching you by surprise, you're not alone. With the mounting responsibilities HR leaders and professionals face, keeping up with trends can feel like just another task. But with a few adjustments, you can be the one sharing trends instead of reacting to them. A few ways you can do this include:

- Following leading HR publications: AIHR and Gartner are great examples of these. Checking in on these publications can give you the overview you need to stay up to date.

- Sign up for webinars: There's no shortage of companies offering webinars on important HR topics and evolving trends. Since you can attend these webinars while you work on other tasks, they're a great way to stay up to date even when you're busy.
- Engage with peer communities: Whether it's through a Slack group or real-world networking events, engaging with like-minded peers can be an effective way to stay ahead of trends.
- Use advanced HR software: Platforms like 15Five evolve to match HR trends, which means they'll help guide you as you engage with these trends.

Staying ahead

The key trends to look out for in 2026 center around the evolution of HR technology, skills-based hiring, the importance of strategic employee experience and engagement, foundational DEIB efforts, hybrid work, and reskilling.

Going forward, HR professionals won't be judged on their ability to handle administrative tasks, but on their contributions to their organization's resilience and their data-backed approach to broader strategy. Is your organization ready for these changes? Or are you already finding yourself catching up?