5 Bold Workplace Predictions for the Rest of 2026

HR Executive | Caitlin Kamm | February 19, 2026



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As we continue to settle into 2026, the workplace is poised for significant transformation driven by technological advancement, immigration policy shifts and evolving employee needs. Here's what HR leaders should prepare for in the year ahead.

AI literacy won't cut it—companies will demand 'AI native' employees

The bar for AI competency is rising dramatically. While 2025 focused on basic AI literacy, like using ChatGPT for emails or automating repetitive tasks, 2026 will likely mark the emergence of truly AI-native workforces, particularly in tech.

Companies are increasingly looking for workers who use AI as a thought partner and have it embedded in their day-to-day. These professionals can screen-share complex, multi-stakeholder processes with AI tools to coach others who are new to the business or to specific processes. This capability transforms how institutional knowledge gets transferred and how quickly new team members can become productive.

Later this year, agentic AI will likely bring an increasing demand for AI orchestration skills. However, earlier in the year will be the proliferation of formal AI governance frameworks, laying the compliance and decision-making-rights groundwork for agentic AI. Organizations will have to establish documented policies and norms defining which work tasks and content can be

shared with AI tools. This governance focus will coincide with heightened attention to information security, protecting customers, employees and the business itself in an AI-augmented environment.

AI will transform recruiting by shifting focus from quantity to quality

Recruiting will undergo its most significant transformation in decades in 2026, driven by AI's ability to handle repetitive tasks.

AI will help recruiting teams achieve dramatic improvements in time-to-fill and time-to-hire by eliminating redundancies and producing efficiency gains in velocity. However, this automation will enable a fundamental shift: Recruiters will finally be able to focus more on the quality of talent itself, rather than the historical focus on quantity that has dominated the profession.

Simultaneously, applicant tracking systems will evolve their AI detection capabilities in response to the uptick in fake candidates and fake job postings. Ironically, ATS platforms will increasingly use AI to detect AI use in the hiring process—everything from fake candidates and deepfakes interviewing to real candidates using AI to respond to situational or behavioral interview questions.

The bigger picture: AI will create more jobs, not eliminate them. Similar to how spreadsheets didn't replace finance teams, AI is a tool that will create more demand for professionals who can operate that tool effectively.

Immigration policy shifts will redefine cross-border talent strategies

The current presidential administration's policies will continue reshaping how companies access global talent throughout 2026, requiring HR teams to become more sophisticated about alternative immigration pathways.

There will definitely be a decrease in new H-1B visas so long as those applicants are in other countries. However, companies should expect to see more TN visas and more professionals coming to or through Canada for work authorization.

This shift will require HR teams to develop expertise in visa categories beyond the traditional H-1B route and potentially establish or expand Canadian operations to facilitate talent mobility. Organizations serious about accessing global talent pools will need to think strategically about geographic presence as an enabler of workforce planning.

'Job hugging' will test HR's ability to read market signals

The phenomenon of "job hugging," where employees stay in roles longer than they might otherwise due to economic uncertainty, will continue throughout this year. But the question remains: Where will the pendulum swing between employers' and employees' market conditions?

As companies navigate economic headwinds, tariff implications and policy changes from the current administration, the calculus around talent mobility will remain complex. HR leaders will

need to monitor whether increased efficiency from AI adoption, combined with potential immigration restrictions, creates renewed competition for qualified talent—potentially shifting leverage back toward employees despite broader economic concerns.

The organizations that will thrive are those preparing for both scenarios: retention strategies if job hugging continues, and competitive positioning if the talent market suddenly loosens.

Fertility and childcare benefits will become a must-have

Fertility and parental benefits will take center stage in 2026, accelerated by California's recent mandate requiring large group insurance plans to cover certain fertility diagnoses and treatments.

The critical insight that most organizations are missing is that parents can't take advantage of wellness benefits without childcare. The traditional wellness benefit portfolio that typically includes gym memberships, meditation apps and mental health support fails working parents who lack the time to use these resources because they're managing caregiving responsibilities.

Parents will increasingly demand that wellness benefits include childcare support. Progressive companies will recognize that childcare isn't a separate benefit category but a prerequisite for parents to access the entire benefits portfolio they're already offering. Organizations that treat parental support as foundational rather than supplemental will gain significant advantages in attracting and retaining working parents.

A year of strategic adaptability

These predictions share a common thread: the need for HR leaders to build frameworks and capabilities that can adapt as these trends unfold. Success in 2026 won't come from having all the answers today, but from creating organizational structures flexible enough to respond to rapid technological, regulatory and workforce changes.

The months ahead will require HR leaders to develop new competencies—from understanding alternative immigration pathways to establishing AI governance frameworks to reconceptualizing benefits architecture around the realities of working parents' lives. Those who approach these challenges with strategic agility rather than rigid planning will position their organizations to thrive regardless of which way the pendulum swings.