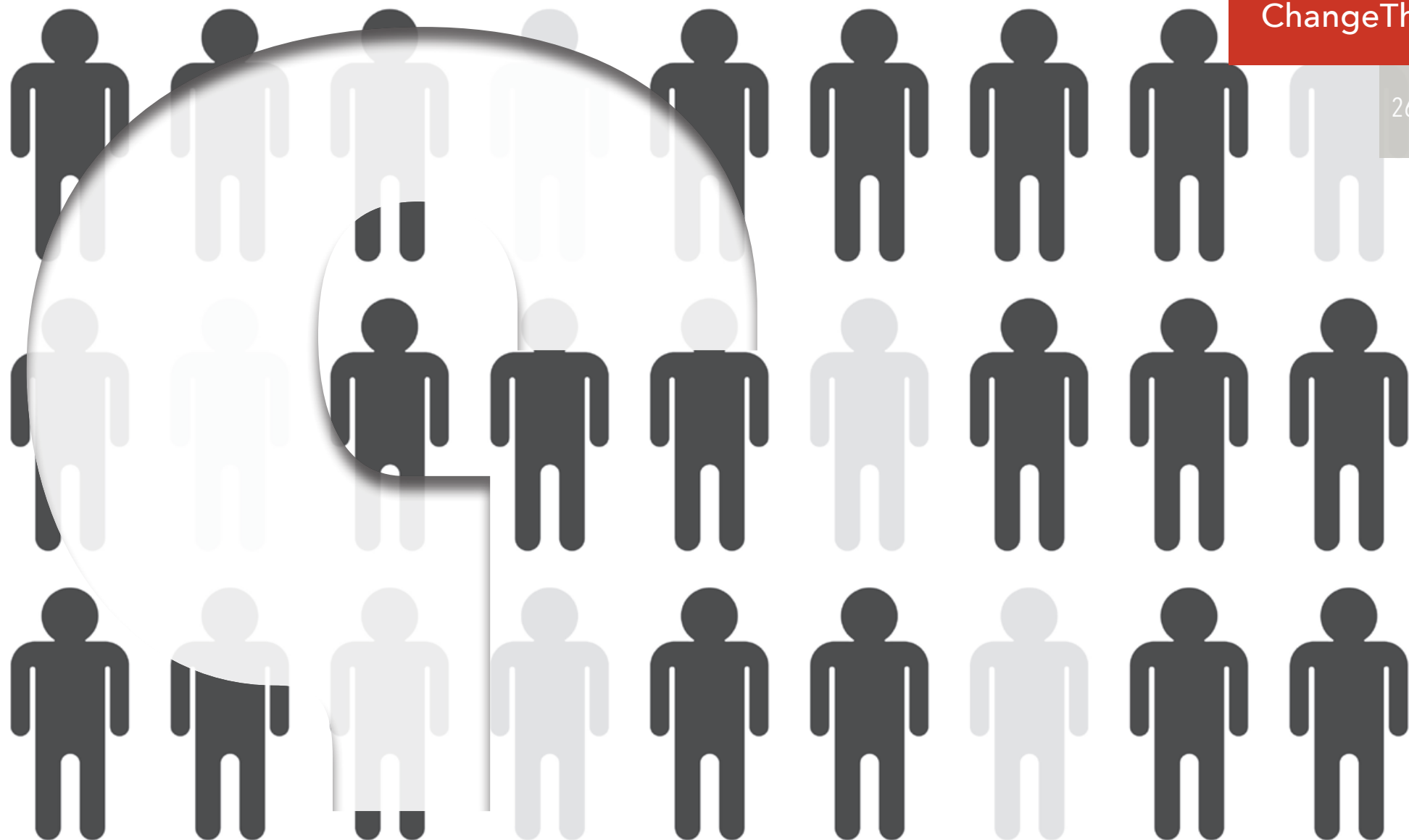




A FOREVER-TIGHT LABOR MARKET: WHY PURSUING AN EMPLOYEE-FOCUSED WORKFORCE STRATEGY IS ESSENTIAL IN TODAY'S ECONOMY

Jerry Rubin & Steven L. Dawson

Sailors know well the difference between the shifting winds above, and the hidden, steady current below. Over the past ten years, the US labor market has been buffeted much the same, with labor *demand* shifting dramatically while, hidden beneath the surface, the US labor *supply*—those who are available and willing to work—has slowly, inevitably tightened.

Over the past ten years, US labor demand has ebbed and flowed: from 2016 through 2020, the US unemployment rate hovered at a “full-employment” rate near four percent, then spiked above 14 percent in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, only to return within two years to just over four percent.¹ By the end of 2025, the rapid introduction of artificial intelligence (AI) technology, combined with the traumatic economic policies of the second Trump administration, injected significant instability in the demand for workers—loosening the labor market for some occupations, such as computer coding, while tightening it for others, such as long-term care.

Yet during this same ten-year period, hidden beneath the turmoil in labor demand, the supply of labor in the US workforce continued to experience a slow, steady constriction that continues to this day: Relatively fewer native-born workers are entering the workforce; a greater percentage are choosing not to work; and an aging baby boom generation is inevitably exiting the workforce.

More abruptly, this systemic tightening of the US labor market has been further exacerbated by the second Trump administration's decision to significantly constrain immigration. Such a dramatic constraint on immigration is of particular importance because, since the beginning of this decade, the US workforce has expanded *primarily* due to the addition of foreign-born workers. You read that right: Since 2020—for demographic reasons we explain later—the number of native-born Americans entering the US labor market had expanded less than two percent by the fall of 2025, compared to an increase of nearly 14 percent of foreign-born workers. *Without immigration during this decade, our US labor force would have barely expanded at all.*²

Welcome to our country's emerging "forever-tight" labor market. What will this require of you, the employer? Since the underlying cause of this relentless tightening of labor supply is structural, it is likely that your own organization—whether for-profit, nonprofit, or governmental—will in turn be forced to undertake comparable structural changes in how you find, hire, and retain your workers. Indeed, your workforce strategy may now become as important as your customer-service strategy. Pursuing an employee-focused workforce strategy is no longer merely a competitive advantage; it is fast becoming a competitive necessity.

This is undoubtedly true for those of you who are in the business community—owners, managers, workers, investors—constantly struggling to find and keep enough competent staff to meet customer demand. However, we also believe both our analysis and our recommendations are equally valid for those who hire employees within nonprofit and governmental organizations.

In particular, we write to those of you who are among our country's emerging generation of diverse new organizational leaders. You are likely already an owner or manager, or intend to be one soon, responsible for finding and keeping strong, productive workers. In the coming years, you are among those who will shape the future of the US economy—and therefore the broader US culture. It is you we most hope to help thrive within our country's forever-tight labor market.

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AND WHO MIGHT WE BE?

Each of us has contributed more than thirty-five years to leading organizations that help employers across the US find, hire, and retain qualified workers. In doing so, our organizations in turn have helped thousands of workers prepare for and secure quality jobs. Our goal has always been to find common ground between employers and workers, appealing to the shared self-interests of both. Experience has taught us that the tighter the labor market, the greater those shared interests. Still, we are not naïve about how challenging it is for you to find, hire, and retain workers. We assure you that you'll not find us hawking "ten easy steps to solve your labor needs." We both retired from leading our organizations a few years ago—and so we are not attempting to sell you any one proprietary "solution."

Instead, we want to introduce you to a broad variety of well-researched workforce strategies, resources, and potential partners. Our new book, *Help Wanted*, is a kind of map, one that offers a wide range of recruitment, hiring, training, organizational redesign, and government relations solutions. You get to decide where you want to start, and where you hope to arrive. Most importantly, you get to choose your own path. In this piece, we introduce you to the overall argument in the book, and...

THREE KEY THEMES

We want to underscore here, briefly, three themes that are woven throughout the book.

RELATIONSHIPS ARE KEY | First, elevating your workforce strategy so that it is at least equal to that of your customer strategy reveals an essential truth: that both customers and workers are people, not abstractions. *Relationships between people* form the core logic of our approach. Businesses are not numbers; they are organizations alive with thinking, feeling, and creative human beings. All workforce solutions start here.

ONE SMALL STEP AT A TIME | Second, we do *not* suggest that you immediately design and implement all at once a multifaceted, comprehensive plan to address all aspects of your workforce strategy. Instead, it bears repeating that what we have provided for you here is a kind of map—and it is entirely up to you where you want to start, where you are headed, and how quickly you want to proceed. We urge you to “start small and test widely,” for we know from our own experience that, in this ceaseless competition for talent, there is no one correct approach or single best model.

THE ONE ESSENTIAL “MUST” | Third, in keeping with our intent to make our book a type of map, we tried very hard to remove as many “you should ...” prescriptions as possible. As it turns out, that’s easier said than done, though we believe we’ve done a decent job in offering you a wide range of menus, and relatively few mandates.

However, we do propose one essential *must*: You **must** talk with your employees. Talk with your current employees, your prospective employees, even your past employees. And don’t just talk, but also listen. Not just once, but always. This is the definition of true leadership. There is simply no other way for you, as a leader in your organization, to build a competitive workforce.

MAKING IT REAL

Finally, to help make these workforce solutions come alive throughout the book, we introduce you to a diverse range of leaders from whom we learned so many of our suggested strategies. These brief case studies highlight that even though competing within a forever-tight labor market will always be a challenge, it can also prove to be an incredibly exciting, creative—and profitable—journey.

Ahead is the first of these case studies.

Optimax of Ontario, New York, is an exceptionally creative company—and if we were younger men, we would be very tempted to knock on their door and ask for a job.

CASE STUDY : OPTIMAX—THE BUSINESS LOGIC OF CREATIVITY³

Optimax,⁴ based in Ontario, New York, designs and manufactures precision optical lenses. Not the kind you balance on your nose, but rather the kind used in the camera system on the Mars rovers; the kind used in the New Horizons spacecraft that took amazing pictures of Pluto; the kind used in quantum computers that direct photons to process information at light speed.

“We make the invisible visible,” states Ale’ Mendoza, Optimax’s director of human resources, “and we mean that in two very different, but parallel ways: First, for our customers, by bending light to reveal the unseen; and second, for our employees, by making the financial and business inner workings of our company transparent.”

Businesses are not numbers; they are organizations alive with thinking, feeling, and creative human beings. All workforce solutions start here.

To craft their highly specialized lenses, Optimax likes to hire widely—from high school grads to PhDs—with particular interest in musicians, gamers, and artists. Those tend to be the types of individuals who are attracted to work as a *craft*, rather than just a job.

Optimax does not only train these “nontraditional” employees in the basics of computer numerical control (CNC) technology. From there, the company also launches them on a path of continuous learning—for example, by partnering with the local Monroe Community College and Finger Lakes Community College for customized on-the-job training.

And Optimax is not a small, boutique company with a handful of employees—though it started out that way over thirty years ago, hunkered down in what used to be an old barn on the outskirts of Rochester, New York. Today, Optimax employs more than 450 staff and is recognized as a leader among the more than one hundred other optics-related businesses in the greater Rochester area. In fact, Optimax today is the largest precision optics manufacturer in the United States, with an average revenue growth of 20 percent per year.

CONSTANT EVOLUTION | Optimax is constantly evolving—for evolve it must, as the company continually navigates an optics industry that is experiencing truly existential change. Driving this disruption is a global shift in how information is transmitted and stored: less via electrons and more via photons. The result is revolutionizing semiconductor hardware requirements across the information sector, with Optimax’s optical technologies playing a pivotal role in that revolution. Instead of shrinking its workforce during the COVID-19 pandemic, Optimax experienced the greatest *expansion* in its history in terms of sales, shipments, and hiring. Let’s look at a few of the innovations that continue to make Optimax so creatively successful.

TAPPING THE UNTAPPED, “NONTRADITIONAL” WORKFORCE | To get young people excited about optical phenomena, Optimax builds recruitment pipelines all the way down into local elementary schools and works closely with area high schools to establish curricula that embrace emerging optical technologies. These efforts include an educator

internship program to expose existing tech-based teachers to real-world experience in the optics industry and to better communicate the value of precision optics employment to students.

Also, Optimax staff regularly present in high school classrooms, meeting directly with students, and their parents, to encourage interning and job shadowing within the company. And, Optimax has developed a “virtuous cycle” of engagement with local community colleges and vocational technical schools to develop a sustainable pipeline of workers.

JOB REDESIGN | Optimax enables a culture of employee empowerment—using a “power with” versus a “power over” approach—that sets the framework to manage Optimax’s more than thirty flexible lean-manufacturing work-cell teams. This allows all employees to own from end to end the entire production of each component. The company also offers a range of nontraditional benefits, including an interest-free loan of up to \$2,000 to meet any short-term financial emergency.

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RETHINKING GOVERNMENT RELATIONS | Led by former CEO Rick Plympton, Optimax worked closely with the US Department of Commerce and the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program to help author the department’s national *Job Quality Toolkit*.⁵

Optimax continues to embrace the core elements of this toolkit to reinforce the best employment practices and remain progressive in attracting and retaining its own competitive workforce. More broadly, Optimax regularly communicates the benefits of the toolkit, raising the bar of employment practices throughout the Rochester region's optics sector.

FORGING A WORKFORCE FOR THE FUTURE | As Optimax continues to expand dramatically, Mendoza described two fundamental organizational changes for which he, as HR director, is now responsible when preparing Optimax's workforce of the future:

Traditionally, Optimax has worked with customers only in the initial phase of product design. Having manufactured the prototype, that was the last we saw of the product. Now, many customers want us to become the prime suppliers of those new optical products. And that means co-designing with our customers entirely new systems of manufacturing, which requires a greatly expanded manufacturing workforce having a broad, new range of skills. The impact on our company's culture will be enormous.

Long range, as our founding leaders entered the later stages of their careers, we had to rethink the company's ownership structure. So, we've now embarked on an ownership/governance restructuring called a "Perpetual Purpose Trust" that has three unshakeable bylaws: (1) never sell the company to an outside owner; (2) share at least 25 percent of profits with employees, and (3) ensure that the company stays true to the founders' original purpose of creating value for our customers and financial security for our employees.

That last point means that Optimax will forever advance its leadership as a technological innovator and, in doing so, continue to create ever more and better jobs within its community.

EINSTEIN WAS WRONG

Einstein allegedly claimed, “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.”⁶ Yet Einstein’s quote is wrong—or, at most, only half-right. It is correct only if the environment remains static. However, if the environment changes fundamentally, then the opposite is true: Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting the same result. As the US economy shifts structurally into a forever-tight labor market, employers who continue to deploy the same outdated recruitment and retention workforce strategies over and over again will inevitably discover that they can no longer attract and retain a productive, profitable workforce.

We hope that you, like us, see that there are opportunities available in the way the workforce is changing, and that you will become another shining example of the creativity and tenacity of American employers in the face of a very challenging labor-market environment. Yours is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to redefine what it means to be a *savvy employer* within the new economic reality of a forever-tight labor market 📧

Adapted from *Help Wanted: How to Find and Keep Talent in a Forever-Tight Labor Market* by Jerry Rubin and Steven L. Dawson, published by The MIT Press. Copyright © 2026 Massachusetts Institute of Technology. All rights reserved.



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Endnotes

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