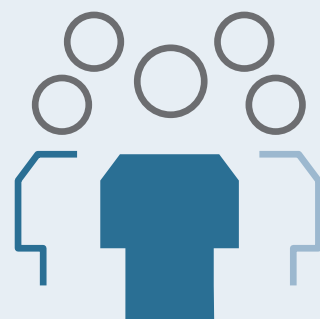


BEST IN
HR
AWARDS
— 2024 —



PRESENTING SPONSORS



FUTURE WORKFORCE IN FOCUS

How Christine Motherwell is modernizing the HR function at Coca-Cola Consolidated

BY LAURA WILLIAMS-TRACY

Human resources professionals have faced an increase in job stress over the past four years, contending with trends such as remote work and labor shortages that made it harder to keep a handle on staffing, safety and employee satisfaction. Christine Motherwell stepped into the breach in early 2022 to take the lead HR role at Coca-Cola Consolidated Inc. at a pivotal time for the company. Motherwell drew upon her two decades of diverse roles within the Coca-Cola system to modernize the HR function and rally the company's 17,000-person workforce across 14 states.

"Leading people and developing people and helping people to be their best is something that I have always had a passion for," says Motherwell, who spent 14 years in sales and operations before making the move to HR in 2018. "I had moved through a number of different roles and functions but my heart always gravitated, no matter the function, to leading and coaching and developing people."

For her role leading the workforce of one of the largest public companies in the region, Motherwell is the Lifetime Achievement Award recipient in the *Charlotte Business Journal's* 2024 Best in HR Awards program.

Coke Consolidated is the largest Coca-Cola bottler in the United States. Between 2015 and 2019, the company acquired new territories across the Southeast and Mid-Atlantic. It now provides more than 300

brands and flavors to some 60 million consumers across 14 states and the District of Columbia.

Motherwell is a Coca-Cola lifer, having joined the system not long after earning her undergraduate and master's degrees in marketing and management in her home state of Illinois. She started with a bottler in the Chicago area, then moved to a national account executive role with The Coca-Cola Co. headquarters in Atlanta. In 2011, Motherwell came to Coke Consolidated in Charlotte as a senior director of customer management, overseeing the company's relationship with Walmart. Sales and operations roles led to HR.

"It seemed like such a natural progression," says Motherwell, adding that nontraditional paths are not unheard of at the company. "One thing we do really well at Coke Con-

solidated is, when the role is right and the fit is right, we have quite a few people either permanently sitting in a role that's maybe not what they grew up in or doing a stretch assignment to get experience as they move on. That exposure for the time they are in that role will help them be better at what they are going on to do. It's part of our culture that we do it."

Motherwell's chief of staff was previously CFO of a subsidiary business. Those skills in finance are critical as her team focuses on the company's total rewards for employees, an initiative that comes with a large financial implication for the organization.

"These can be big stretches or smaller stretches, but they make people so much better" at work, Motherwell says. "It's part of our learning and development DNA here."

Motherwell tapped that DNA to take up HR leadership almost three years ago.

"What has been monumental for myself and other HR leaders has been coming out of Covid and how people and the economy rebounded," Motherwell says. "It was the Great Resignation, inflation, a whole new generation entering the workforce and their changing expectations, work from home and how to balance that."

Even in normal times, Coke Consolidated has a very remote workforce. Thousands of drivers and merchandisers visit supermarkets and convenience stores across the territories to deliver product. During the pandemic, the beverage manufacturer was an essential business, and employees continued work in the field. Today, they may only come to the main facility once a month.

"It required us to be excellent communicators in uncertain times in the economy and in the world," she says. "We had to keep staffed and keep growing with our purpose and culture."

For the employees whose jobs could be done from home, Coke Consolidated, like so many others, permitted its nearly 3,000 office workers to work from home. As the pandemic subsided, the company moved back to in-office expectations with corporate staff there four days a week.

"We were clear on our communication that we serve our purpose and each other best when we are together," Motherwell says. "There was flexibility before Covid and more flexibility during Covid. Now our culture is an in-office culture. We are where we are today because of how we commu-



nicated and set expectations during Covid."

Another challenge has been a nationwide labor shortage, especially for in-person, customer-facing positions or manufacturing roles that demand specialized technical skills.

To make its jobs more attractive, Coke Consolidated is using artificial intelligence to automate mundane tasks. Drivers no longer have to count the pallets of beverages they deliver, for example. AI handles that.

"We want to take away the boring tasks that make people want to leave their jobs," Motherwell said. "If we

Christine Motherwell stepped into the top HR role at Coca-Cola Consolidated Inc. in 2022.



MELISSA KEY | CBJ

can take that noise off and let them add value, we want to do that. We need thinkers.”

Coke Consolidated’s HR function is using AI to cull through applications and quickly identify the best candidates.

“We are still getting hundreds of applications,” Motherwell says. “The brand Coca-Cola does speak loudly, and it does draw folks in.”

Where AI brings value, Motherwell says, is its ability to function beyond just gate-keeper for a single role. AI goes further with questions to help more candidates find a job

within the organization, even if it’s not the one they initially applied for. An applicant who answers that they are unable to lift 50 pounds, eliminating them from a merchandising role, will receive a series of follow-up questions, such as whether they have a commercial driver’s license or can stand for a number of hours a day, to screen them for other available roles.

“It doesn’t close off the applicant. We have 45 other front-line roles that you may be qualified for,” Motherwell says. “All of these roles are feeder roles into front-line supervisors so we want to cast a wide net in recruiting.”

The biggest HR challenge Coke Consolidated faces is a shrinking pool of mechanics needed to keep production lines moving, Motherwell says. “We have some highly technical, specific roles, such as mechanics, and folks just aren’t going into those jobs. Commercial drivers are also hard to find.”

The company partners with colleges to identify students pursuing technical and mechanical education and make a pitch for them to come on board. There’s also an apprenticeship program to draw talent to such roles.

Filling the talent gap for Coke Con-

solidated means spending time making career pathways more explicit to existing employees. Whereas getting ahead in the past might have depended on a manager pushing an employee forward, the company is putting that power in the hands of employees by giving them tools to focus on their own career growth.

“Coke is a tremendous organization. I’ve had 14 jobs in 21 years and they were all very diverse roles,” Motherwell says. “If you are new here, you may not see that for yourself.”

New programs implemented by HR seek to quantify skills necessary for each job and demonstrate how they can be applied in other roles.

“We are doing a lot around how to demonstrate ... career paths so people can see this as a career and not just a job,” Motherwell says.

Retaining a motivated workforce requires a focus on creating an atmosphere of belonging. Motherwell says the tenants of modern-day diversity, equity and inclusion programs have been part of Coke Consolidated for more than 20 years.

“We continue to be intentional because it’s critical for our future success to have diversity defined in every way and a diversity of thought to help make decisions on where we will go,” she says.

Coke Consolidated uses an annual employee engagement survey to see how teammates feel about with the company and whether they feel a sense of belonging. The feedback is used to improve the organization. The company operates a number of Employee Resource Groups.

“Whatever it is you are looking for, you will find your seat at the table here,” she adds.

Motherwell says she’s most satisfied in her role when she hears from employees that their experience was improved.

“I love it when I hear, ‘Thanks for the video you sent out about sustainability and what we are doing to recycle plastic bottles,’ she says. “When you are managing large teams, the core fundamentals of success are enabling and motivating a very large workforce. ... You do it with great communication, enabling managers to make decisions and making sure people are educated on their roles, that they understand their benefits and how they can be developed. I’d argue to say that any leader, even if they are not in HR, they are HR generalists.”



I had moved through a number of different roles and functions but my heart always gravitated, no matter the function, to leading and coaching and developing people.”

Christine Motherwell,
Senior vice president,
human resources,
Coca-Cola Consolidated Inc.

WINNER

Mecklenburg County Government



HR leader:
Strat Fotos, HR
consultant for
special projects

**Local
employees:**
6,300

Working for Mecklenburg County Government is a chance to serve neighbors in countless ways, from maintaining hundreds of acres of public parks to protecting public health. An initiative of the human resources department called MeckPathways aims to demonstrate the opportunity for meaningful work to a new generation of employees.

MeckPathways began in 2022 and, in its pilot year, the program provided interested high school juniors and seniors the opportunity to gain work experience in the daily operations of departments within county government. In its second year, intern satisfaction increased from 86% to 95%.

Two years later, college students in the Carolinas have been welcomed into the program with an eight-week internship that exposes students to various career types in the government sector. High school students are paid \$15 per hour and college students earn \$20 per hour as they work 20 to 40 hours a week. They fill in-person positions in all 22 county departments, including public health, information technology and social services.

Previously, all internship programs were siloed in departments. MeckPathways is the county’s first centralized internship program designed to build a future talent pipeline and increase Mecklenburg County’s brand as a great employer.



What’s the most challenging part of working in HR these days? Competition amongst employers searching for top talent

What’s working to retain employees and keep them engaged? Focusing on our employees’ well-being by promoting a healthy work-life balance

How is AI impacting the HR profession? It helps streamline processes, enabling employees to be more effective and efficient. This gives HR professionals the opportunity to think and work strategically rather than being task oriented. Mecklenburg County is currently exploring the artificial intelligence space.

FINALIST

Charlotte Regional Visitors Authority



HR leader: Zaira Goodman, Chief human resources officer

Local employees: 920

If coming to visit Charlotte is all about having a good time, then working for the organization that promotes area venues and experiences needs to be satisfying as well. The Charlotte Regional Visitors Authority’s human resources team developed a comprehensive set of programs to manage talent, engage employees, promote diversity, foster learning and reward employees with a total compensation package.

All full- and part-time employees stay informed with quarterly all-team meetings, a robust intranet called myCRVA, engagement surveys and mandatory, one-on-one meetings with managers. To champion employee well-being, the organization hosts summer outings, health and safety fairs and guest speakers to help employees with mental and financial health. CRVA pioneered the establishment of employee-led advisory groups.

Team members from various levels – from those who work in marketing to those managing or cleaning various facilities, such as the Charlotte Convention Center or Bojangles Coliseum – participate and lead task forces on topics such as DEI, safety or recognition programs. These groups empower employees to contribute their perspectives and ideas, leading to meaningful improvement in CRVA’s policies, practices, customer service and employee development. An engaged team creates a more enjoyable experience for those visiting the Queen City.

FINALIST

Lancaster County Water and Sewer District



HR leader: English Henderson, Human resources director

Local employees: 102

When you turn the faucet, the water comes on. In one area of the region, that’s thanks to a county utility and a workforce dedicated to managing water and sewer services.

In 2022, the Lancaster County Water and Sewer District, a special-purpose district that provides water and sewer services to unincorporated areas, conducted its first-ever employee satisfaction and engagement survey to collect employees’ honest opinions about a wide variety of issues related to their jobs. LCWSD got high marks from employees who said they had the necessary safety tools required to do their jobs. They were satisfied with their benefits package and paid time off. Employees liked the work environment, the hours and job security.

What employees said was falling short was communication between departments and better pathways for professional growth, including increased pay for earning certifications. To improve cooperation between departments and work groups, LCWSD built relationships between employees by holding employee events, such as a cornhole tournament and a holiday dinner. A new quarterly newsletter shares departmental updates and achievements. To address concerns about pay, the district implemented a summer schedule within some departments and remote work for others. The district added a new maternity and parental leave policy. Turnover within the LCWSD over the past five years is 3.25%, less than half of the average turnover rate for the state. The average tenure is almost 10 years.

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WINNER

Moore & Van Allen



HR leader:
Stephanie Dixon,
Chief people
officer

**Local
employees:** 674
**Employees
companywide:**
713

The law firm of Moore & Van Allen has more than 700 attorneys and staff members serving clients in over 90 areas of focus. It's one of the largest law firms in the Southeast and the largest in North Carolina.

The firm's growth led MVA's management committee to expand its leadership structure. An inaugural chief people officer was hired in 2023 to build a more robust human resources function. Initiatives have included strengthening the firm's business professional staff with a monthly Managers Forum, during which managers discuss nonlegal departments such as marketing, information technology, accounting and facilities. The group brainstormed an employee recognition program called MVA MVP.

MVA's robust Business Resource Groups, such as the LGBTQ+ Resource Group and Women of MVA, have seen increased participation and understanding since the launch of a quarterly internal newsletter highlighting the



BRG's efforts within the firm.

Inside the HR department, greater efficiencies resulting from realigned duties and titles helped support the creation of a director of administration function. Now MVA is poised for even more growth, and in 2024 MVA announced one of its largest ever classes of new partners.

What's the most challenging part of working in HR these days? In

the legal industry, which is seeing unprecedented and rapid change and attorney movement, my team and I work intently to remain abreast of new developments — such as trends, best practices in talent management, tech and billing — to then consider and work to understand how they impact our people. HR is a people-first job function, so it is our job to stay informed, responsive and maintain a foundational understanding of our attorneys' practices.

What's working to retain employees and keep them engaged? It is incredibly important that our objectives and efforts in the HR department align with the firm's longstanding values and growth goals. We have dedicated significant time and effort to streamlining workflows, determining how best to leverage technology, bolstering professional development opportunities, and broadening internal communications. These efforts have worked to support MVA's sense of community and continued growth.

How is AI impacting the HR profession? Artificial intelligence presents unique opportunities for us to work smarter and prioritize the aspects of our roles that bring the most value to the firm. We are embracing the ways in which AI helps us to efficiently develop meaningful employee activities, create and maintain integrated personnel functions, and emphasize human engagement. As roles evolve and the skills necessary to perform them deepen, for some it will present an opportunity to reskill and upskill for advancement.

FINALIST

American Tire Distributors

HR leader:
Rebecca Sinclair,
Chief people and
corporate affairs
officer

**Local
employees:** 700
**Companywide
employees:**
4,500

American Tire Distributors is one of the largest independent suppliers in the replacement tire market. It operates more than 115 distribution centers, serving approximately 80,000 customers across the country.

ATD embarked on an effort to transform its company culture by creating a work environment where people feel knowledgeable, celebrated and supported. In just five years, this effort has positioned ATD as a destination workplace, with the company earning a coveted spot in *Newsweek's* Top 100 Most Loved Workplaces list in 2022 and 2023. ATD built a connected culture while reskilling the workforce.

The work started with an employee survey, results of which were used to focus on benefits and compensation, well-being, diversity and inclusion, talent management and associate recognition. Among the changes made is a tiered benefits system that reduces costs for the lowest-paid associates. In addition, a new policy allows employees to operate on a hybrid schedule by working remotely or at the Field Support Center in Huntersville. That facility includes a fitness center and wellness program to encourage associates to actively engage in their physical health.

With a focus on diversity, ATD has improved gender representation at the senior vice president and director levels while ethnic diversity increased slightly at the manager level. A \$1 million investment in the creation of a data-based talent management system has enabled ATD to staff stronger teams and identify reskilling and upskilling opportunities.

FINALIST

Northwood Ravin



HR leader:
Katherine
Crockett, Vice
president of
human resources

**Local
employees:** 225
**Employees
companywide:**
406

Northwood Ravin is a real estate development, construction and property management company with apartment communities and mixed-use venues in the Mid-Atlantic and Southeast. The company's approach to human resources has focused recently on addressing inefficiencies and pain points to support employees.

One example is what's called full-cycle recruiting and hiring, which aims to shorten the time that team members take on more job duties due to a vacant role in their department. The recruiting approach endeavors to hire the right person for the role as quickly as possible, reducing the number of open positions and preserving the job happiness of the person taking on additional duties. A new, structured hiring process creates a clear roadmap for hiring managers to follow and has resulted in a 61% reduction in open positions over the last year.

Northwood Ravin also altered the way it addresses team members' performance concerns. A new "Success Plan" is added to managers' toolkits to address issues. It's a more cooperative approach that has received positive feedback.

In 2023, Northwood Ravin saw a significant increase in on-the-job injuries. The firm created a return-to-work program that partners with the insurance carrier to conduct a root cause analysis based on injury type. Hands-on training with 23 service managers served to designate them as "Safety Champions" for their respective properties. The result is a 90% reduction in on-the-job injuries.

FINALIST

RVO Health



HR leader: Nikki Ballard, Chief people officer
Local employees: 270 employees
Employees companywide: 1,427

RVO Health operates the largest health information platform in the U.S., helping nearly 100 million people a month seek health information, find doctors, save money, and effectively manage their health and well-being. The company offers a wide range of digital health services and products through a portfolio of brands. RVO Health is a joint venture between UnitedHealth Group and Red Ventures that formed in 2022.

The company's human resources team faced the challenge of quickly establishing a strong, cohesive company culture and robust HR infrastructure to support rapid growth and employee engagement in a competitive talent market. The work included offering a robust benefits package that includes parental and mental health support. RVO Health established a diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging team and launched six Employee Impact Groups. As employees came to RVO Health from other companies, HR performed a job inventory and leveling exercise to establish a new, cohesive compensation philosophy.

Employees have access to such benefits as Healthgrades, a company that helps people find appropriate doctors, hospitals, care facilities and prescription savings. A platform called Bezy provides chronic condition support.

As a result of RVO Health's rapid and comprehensive implementation of a full suite of HR services and benefits, 92% of employees report that they believe management cares about their well-being. Another 84% feel RVO Health allows them to maintain a good blend of life and work.

FINALIST

Tepper Sports & Entertainment



HR leader: Kisha Smith, Senior vice president and chief people officer
Local employees: 428

Tepper Sports & Entertainment is a business centered around building a team. TSE owns and operates the NFL's Carolina Panthers, Charlotte FC of Major League Soccer and Bank of America Stadium. Beyond bringing sports and entertainment to the people of the Carolinas and beyond, TSE is internally focused on making the company a great place to work.

TSE has experienced significant growth over the last six years, leading to an influx of new employees and rapid scaling of operations. This created a need to increase talent recruitment, focus on retaining high performers and develop ways to support employees with increased workloads.

TSE updated its talent acquisition practices with a focus on diversifying candidate pools. More intentional recruiting efforts include an inclusive behavioral selection process. There's also a new role for a director of inclusion and belonging, which engages diverse communities through professional networking opportunities.

The company's HR team launched new professional development programs including TSE University, which provides employees with a free library of online courses covering topics ranging from effective management styles to computer skills. TSE also contracted with Fierce Conversations, a leadership training framework that equips team members with the tools for difficult conversations with each other and with external stakeholders. To promote work-life harmony, TSE provides unlimited paid time off, giving employees added flexibility in their personal lives.



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WINNER

CCS Construction Staffing



HR leader: Chloe Andrews, Vice president of HR

Employees companywide: 94 internal (everyone is remote) and 800-plus temporary employees weekly

CCS Construction Staffing is a provider of tradesmen to crews throughout the U.S. that, like many employers, transitioned its team from in office to fully remote during the pandemic. While many companies have returned to the office, CCS developed a program that allows the team to continue to work remotely.

The remote work plan is credited with greatly increasing productivity, boosting employee morale and aiding work/life balance. The model helped CCS stem losses during the Great Resignation; at one point, CCS was losing 50% of its employees.

CCS Construction Staffing has deployed an human resources platform called Lattice, which has made employee/manager reviews more consistent and efficient. Additionally, CCS added an employee career path for all positions. The path provides each employee with a defined track so they understand their career potential and the steps necessary to achieve professional goals.

A learning management system has streamlined new-hire training, with the result being employees are more knowledgeable and prepared for their position. This improves the likelihood of success and their



happiness in the role. With these programs, CCS's turnover rate has declined to less than 5% per year, which is remarkably low for the staffing industry.

What's the most challenging part of working in HR these days? One of the most significant challenges is navigating the evolving landscape of employee expectations and workplace dynamics. With the rise of remote work, HR professionals must

ensure that organizational culture and communication remain strong while fostering a sense of belonging among a dispersed workforce. We are almost 100% remote, and I am proud to be a part of an organization that continues to value 1:1 conversations with employees and relationship development despite not being able to collaborate in person. We have been able to utilize technology to keep our team connected and growing.

What's working to retain employees and keep them engaged? Effective retention strategies hinge on understanding and valuing employee feedback. Implementing regular 1:1 conversations and engagement surveys helps identify areas for improvement. Offering development opportunities, such as career growth paths and training programs, also plays a crucial role. Furthermore, creating a culture of recognition and appreciation, where achievements are celebrated and employees feel valued, significantly enhances engagement and loyalty.

How is AI impacting the HR profession? We are wholeheartedly embracing artificial intelligence at CCS. AI is transforming HR and the business world in general. It helps HR professionals focus on strategic initiatives rather than administrative duties by automating manual and cumbersome tasks or serving as a quick search tool. Additionally, AI tools can analyze employee data to identify trends in engagement and turnover, enabling proactive interventions. We understand that, despite all the benefits AI can provide, it is still essential to balance integration with a human touch, ensuring that the emotional and relational aspects of HR are not lost in the process.

FINALIST

Builtech Services



HR leader: Jonathan Ribskis, Director of talent optimization

Local employees: 15

Employees companywide: 95

Builtech is a mid-sized general contractor that builds commercial and multifamily projects in Charlotte and across the country. The family-owned company has been in business for over 22 years.

The firm was struggling to maximize project team efficiency, as it did not have enough insight into team members' strengths, weaknesses and blind spots. To gain insights, Builtech began using a program called The Predictive Index to unveil each other's behavioral preferences. PI measures a person's behavioral drives and needs and reveals their strengths and weaknesses. By using this platform, Builtech has a better understanding of fellow teammates and has been able to adjust communication and interactions to achieve successful projects.

The PI platform has provided significant financial savings for the firm and contributed to a low 6% unplanned attrition rate over the last three years in an industry that averages 20% or greater.

FINALIST

Cirba Solutions



HR leader: Meredith Barius, Chief people and culture officer

Local employees: 25

Employees companywide: 325

Cirba Solutions is a 33-year-old battery recycling and materials processor. The company takes manufacturing scrap from gigafactories and end-of-life batteries and processes them to extract critical materials, supplying these materials back into the supply chain. The company has its largest operational footprint in North America, with six facilities and 350 employees.

Cirba did not have a recognition program to reward employees for their hard work and achievements. The human resources team created a program called Above & Beyond — a nod to employees who exceed expectations. The peer-to-peer program allows employees to express appreciation of their

peers, their manager or anyone who is deserving, supporting a culture of gratitude. Employees being recognized receive points, which can be redeemed for over 80,000 items.

As a result of three mergers, Cirba Solutions had no consistent benefits program. The HR team created Cirba Solutions ONE, a program for the entire company that provides comprehensive coverage for all employees. A new payroll system created at the same time allows employees to view pay stubs, request days off and easily change benefits when needed.

Cirba Solutions plans to double in size in the next 24 months, and these HR improvements will play a vital role in attracting, hiring, and developing the best talent.



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FINALIST

CPI Security



HR leader:
Jennifer Snellgrove, Chief people officer

Local employees: 500

Employees companywide: 750

CPI Security has offered residential and commercial security systems for more than 30 years. The company has only employees — no subcontractors. This approach ensures that technicians are professionally trained and certified to install and teach customers about their smart-home security systems. But finding new employees to fill essential roles has been a challenge that CPI Security’s human resources team had to tackle head-on.

In 2022, CPI Security opened a new building with a fitness facility and on-site athletic director who helps people stay healthy and get back to work faster after an injury. The facility provides an on-site café, where both breakfast and lunch cost \$6 regardless of the menu, which changes daily. On the third floor is an area called Central Station, where incoming calls are taken. The floor has a calming area for agents and an open area for games.

Among CPI Security’s other new perks are a \$100 match for nonprofit giving and access to a chaplain at every site all day on Tuesdays. Starting this spring, CPI Security offers \$5,000 to employees in good standing who are buying their first home.

After experiencing increased turnover in recent years, turnover is down 7% this year while workplace accidents are down 10%. Employee engagement is up 15%.

FINALIST

Discovery Education

HR leader:
Lindsay Powers, Chief people officer

Local employees: 72

Employees companywide: 759

Discovery Education is a growing edtech company with a digital platform that supports learning around the world. It provides multimedia content, instructional supports, innovative classroom tools and corporate partnerships. The company serves approximately 4.5 million educators and 45 million students worldwide with resources accessed in over 100 countries and territories.

In 2023, Discovery Education made a transformational acquisition that brought on more than 220 new employees. Such a large acquisition required Discovery Education to have a scalable and globally consistent approach to its people practices. With a headcount growing more than 25% overnight, the human resources team focused on a high-quality onboarding experience for transitioning employees. The team also worked to unify all employees under a single payroll, benefits and data system. These goals required the launch of a more sophisticated Human Capital Management system that would become the hub for all people-related practices.

The HR team effectively onboarded all new employees from the acquired organization into Discovery Education, providing a welcoming and informative experience to ease the transition. With carefully designed orientation sessions and consistent optional office hours, new employees felt supported. Effective and efficient planning through the acquisition led to approximately \$400,000 in net annualized synergies in HR costs unrelated to headcount.

FINALIST

Passport Labs Inc.



HR leader:
Steven Dockery, Vice president of people operations

Local employees: 80

Employees companywide: 140

Passport Labs Inc. is a technology provider to city governments and other organizations to efficiently manage on-street parking in their communities.

For all of the technology prowess Passport has to offer, the company needed a better learning tool to help managers polish their conversation skills. Few leaders are naturally good at the task; most require training to help them develop the tools to effectively lead groups. Early-career managers, especially, lack the skills and experience to have meaningful conversations. That disadvantage leaves employees to wonder how they are performing, how they can grow, and what their future is.

To address the problem, Passport developed an artificial intelligence-powered role-playing tool called Aiva. The tool allows managers to brainstorm ideas, learn or refresh conversational techniques, and engage in interactive roleplay scenarios to gain experience in responding to employee reactions. Passport launched the tool to coincide with a midyear performance review cycle so managers would be prepared to deliver performance feedback and set expectations for the second half of the year. More than 30 managers who have used the tool report positive interactions with employees.

FINALIST

Whistle Express

HR leader:
Robin Dye, Vice president of talent and culture

Local employees: 50

Employees companywide: 1,500

Whistle Express is a rapidly growing express car wash company with 150 locations throughout the Southeast. The workforce is comprised of primarily part-time employees, who tend to be highly mobile and less likely to develop a sense of loyalty or long-term commitment to Whistle Express. As a result, the company was challenged by a high turnover rate.

To tackle turnover, the company implemented a three-pronged approach. First, it partnered with technology experts specializing in behavioral selection to ensure Whistle Express was choosing to hire the best candidates who were not only qualified but also more likely to stay with the company. Second, its annual employee survey was enhanced by incorporating questions designed to uncover the benefits and priorities that matter most to the part-time workforce. Those questions provided direct insight into what employees value.

Using that information, Whistle Stop introduced two new benefits: paid time off for part-time associates – a rarity in the industry – and a hardship relief fund to assist team members in times of need. These changes demonstrated commitment to listening to employees and providing meaningful support, thereby increasing loyalty and reducing turnover.

As a result, Whistle Stop observed a remarkable 20% reduction in turnover within the first 90 days, with continued improvement over the next six months. Surveys reflect a significant increase in employee satisfaction scores.

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WINNER

Atom Power



HR leader: Amanda Moorhead, Head of people and culture
Employees companywide: Less than 100, mostly at Huntersville headquarters

Atom Power, on a mission to provide what it calls transformative grid technology, created the world’s first commercial UL-listed, digital, solid-state circuit breaker. It uses a semiconductor to interrupt current flow instead of a mechanical device, meaning no moving parts. The company has since developed a suite of electric vehicle charging equipment and services.

As a startup, Atom Power outsourced many HR functions, including payroll, benefits and its human resources information system, or HRIS, which resulted in substantial fees. To lower those costs, Atom Power brought the HRIS platform and all functions in house. In 45 days, Atom Power transformed its human resources function with a new HRIS, payroll system, and a time and attendance system. The company added a new benefits platform and streamlined its recruiting process in the new system. The transformation included bringing device management and expense reporting into the system,



which streamlined other tasks within finance and information technology. All of this was done without adding to HR headcount. The move resulted in a cost savings of over \$200,000 annually in outsourced fees and overpriced benefit costs.

Atom Power HR also addressed the company culture. A 2023 engagement survey revealed low favorability ratings on whether positive changes were happening at the company. In response, an engagement strategy was developed to keep employees informed of happenings in the organization, build brand

awareness and break down silos within the company. Monthly Recharge events – a play on words for the circuit-breaker company – centered on community service, development, well-being and fun. The company increased touchpoints to help employees understand more about their benefits. Now its engagement score is on the way up.

What’s the most challenging part of working in HR these days? The most challenging part of human resources in the technology industry is finding experienced, qualified talent in the local area.

Also, managing expectations of new hires and employees on working in a startup environment. Employees must be agile, innovative, flexible and have grit to deal with ambiguity.

What’s working to retain employees and keep them engaged? Creating a compelling sense of purpose for our employees. Why is what they do each day important? Important to the company, customers, community, environment, themselves. A purpose that extends beyond the placard on the wall and is rooted in who we are.

How is AI impacting the HR profession? Artificial intelligence is impacting HR in a lot of ways — some positive, some negative. We are seeing a lot more AI-generated resumes, cover letters and answers to interview questions. This is a negative, in that you are not getting to know the true candidate. On a positive note, AI is helping align job descriptions to business priorities and performance indicators. AI is a check and balance for policy writing. And AI is able to sift through large amounts of data or information and formulate a summary.

FINALIST

Caged Bird HR

HR leader: Cierra Gross, CEO
Employees companywide: 30

When a dispute arises between a company and its employee, human resources can be caught in the middle. Increasingly, employees recognize that HR exists to protect the company. Caged Bird HR is a business-to-consumer support company that allows individual employees to speak with independent HR professionals.

Caged Bird HR bills itself as the first company to offer employees access to independent HR support. This service addresses a critical gap in traditional HR functions, which often serve the employer’s interests. Independent HR support empowers individuals to navigate workplace challenges, understand their rights and make informed decisions without fear of reprisal or bias.

Cierra Gross started Caged Bird HR in 2022. Since then, she has grown the company to 30 employees and expanded to support clients nationwide. The business has helped thousands of employees by educating them to advocate for themselves at work.

The value of Caged Bird’s services lies in the ability to promote transparency and trust within the workplace. Employees who have access to impartial HR advice can better advocate for themselves, leading to healthier workplace dynamics and increased job satisfaction. The relationship benefits not only employees but also employers, since an informed workforce is more engaged, productive and less likely to be embroiled in internal conflicts.

FINALIST

DEI Directive



HR leader: Malobi Achike, Founder and CEO
Local employees: 2
Employees companywide: 12

DEI Directive is a human resources services company focused on policies, training and initiatives intended to eliminate biases and barriers to enhance individual and organizational growth. Founded by Malobi Achike, the company’s HR program addresses the business problem of a homogeneous workforce and systemic inequities that hinder organizational innovation and employee satisfaction. The program aims to create a more dynamic and representative workforce, improving collaboration and creativity.

To address the business problem of a lack of diversity, equity and inclusion, the HR program implements comprehensive bias training for all employees, establishes diverse hiring panels and creates employee resource groups (ERGs) to support underrepresented demographics. Additionally, the program introduces transparent pay equity audits and career development initiatives aimed at providing equitable opportunities for advancement.

The program has seen a 25% increase in diverse hires over two years, with employee engagement scores improving by 15%, particularly among underrepresented groups. Qualitatively, employees report feeling more valued and included, with surveys indicating a 20% rise in overall job satisfaction and a significant reduction in reported instances of workplace discrimination.

The establishment of ERGs led to enhanced community building and cross-functional collaboration, fostering a more supportive and innovative work environment.

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FINALIST

Feetures



HR leader: Allison Frantz, Human resources director
Local employees: 65 in Charlotte and Newton

Feetures is the family-owned, North Carolina-based company behind a performance sock that’s popular among. Feetures has been in business for 23 years, and only in the last four years has it had a dedicated human resources manager.

Performance reviews for Feetures employees were thought of as more of an annual event than as an opportunity for a continuous flow of communication that could be used to build relationships, discuss needs and provide support. In response, the HR team created an internal process that implements multiple check-ins for employees through the year. New hires have a review on the 21st day of their employment — the number of days it takes to create a habit. Questions are provided prior to the meeting so employees can be prepared for a discussion. The goal is to make sure new employees’ expectations are being met. The approach recognizes that the first three weeks are critical to a new employee’s success.

Employees now have one-on-one meetings with their manager each month. Twice per year, employees and their managers have more formal, structured check-ins. Those reviews include a self-assessment supported with new IT features that allow employees and their managers to share their input. The performance review process fits with Feetures’ supportive, collaborative culture.

FINALIST

Northeast Tool & Manufacturing



HR leader: Mitch Reid, Director of people and culture
Local employees: 42

Northeast Tool & Manufacturing offers contract manufacturing services to the commercial aviation, military defense and space industries. The 60-year-old company works with customers including Blue Origin, SpaceX, GE Aviation and others.

Northeast Tool started a human resources program in 2023. Without an HR function, the company had faced turnover challenges, policy inconsistencies, no onboarding or off-boarding program, and minimal recruiting efforts. There were no job hierarchies or training matrices, and annual reviews were inconsistent, leading to employee frustration.

With a new HR leader, Northeast Tool implemented a system to manage time and labor, benefit administration, payroll and employee performance. The company’s employee handbook, safety manual, employment agreements and flex schedule agreements have been updated.

The company’s headcount grew by 30% in 2024 through streamlined recruiting efforts and technical college relationships. Turnover has decreased from 20% to 2%. A full 10% of the staff were promoted this year. Modern Machine Shop magazine named Northeast Tool a top shop for HR practices.

FINALIST

Park Inc.



HR leader: Kim Dziuk, Director of human resources
Local employees: 210
Employees companywide: 514

Park Inc. is a 30-year-old company providing valet parking, parking management and shuttle services in 26 states. Additional services include traffic control, school crossing guards and occasions such as concerts, corporate gatherings and sporting events. Parking management services include parking garage management and shuttle bus service. Park Inc. operates in 26 states and must stay up to date on regulations and remain in compliance with government contracts in different jurisdictions.

All of these services are labor-intensive positions that can be difficult to fill. There are additional challenges that don’t exist for most jobs. For example, crossing guard shifts are 30 minutes to an hour long, so they are often overlooked by candidates needing to work more hours.

Park Inc.’s HR has streamlined onboarding to allow for more time for manager and staff training. Employee retention has improved by 20% since 2015. In 30 years in business, Park Inc. has the highest staffing levels of its history.

Current staffing levels are attributed to becoming an employer of choice. The company offers competitive pay rates, profit sharing, quarterly rewards bonuses, and milestone anniversary gifts.

FINALIST

Mechanical Contractors

Local employees: 160
Employees companywide: 198

Mechanical Contractors provides design, installation and maintenance for HVAC, plumbing, fire suppression and building automation systems for commercial, industrial and institutional customers.

The company had a leadership model that was centralized, which created bottlenecks and delayed decisions. Mechanical Contractors wanted to enhance operational efficiency and localize decision-making. A restructuring offered the opportunity to empower local leaders, streamline operations and better support individual contributors.

The company restructured to create a new executive framework with a CEO, COO, CFO, and three

vice presidents. Each location was empowered with self-sufficient on-site leadership roles. Six emerging leaders were identified for extensive executive leadership coaching, including group and individual strategy sessions. A comprehensive communication and rollout plan was developed to inform and engage all employees, ensuring a smooth transition.

As a result of the changes, decision-making speed is faster as local leaders make timely decisions without waiting for central approval. Managers are able to provide more direct and effective support to nearly 200 employees, improving overall employee satisfaction and productivity. The decentralized leadership has created a culture conducive to attracting and retaining talent.

FINALIST

The C Brand Group

HR leader: Carolyn Brand, CEO
Local employees: 3
Employees companywide: 11

The C Brand Group is a human resources consulting firm offering fractional and advisory HR services as well as proprietary assessments. The company’s HR program addresses the need for small and midsize organizations to have a robust HR infrastructure without the hefty cost of a full-time HR team.

One growing, midsize client was accustomed to paying 30% recruitment fees to external agencies, leading to inconsistent hiring results and high turnover rates. The client needed a more cost-effective solution that would improve retention rates.

The C Brand Group provided an HR consultant and a recruitment strategist. This team worked closely with the client to accelerate the recruitment process and find candidates who were the right fit. The client retained all new hires facilitated by the C Brand team and saved more than \$120,000 in recruitment fees over nine months.

For another client, C Brand Group provided a drop-in HR team comprising a CHRO, a director-level HR consultant and an HR assistant to streamline performance management, address various employee relations issues, provide strategic advice on critical hires and ensure compliance. The work supported the client’s growth and saved over \$200,000 in full-time staffing costs.

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WINNER

Dentsply Sirona Inc.



HR leader:
Andrea Frohning,
Chief human
resources officer
**Local
employees:** 400
**Employees
companywide:**
15,000

Dentsply Sirona Inc. is the world’s largest manufacturer of professional dental products and technologies. The company undertook an effort to integrate diversity, equity and inclusion efforts globally into the culture in an effort to better support talent attraction, engagement and retention. The company’s DEI Council works to ensure employees are engaged and have access to professional development and work in an inclusive environment.

Dentsply Sirona has nine Employee Resource Groups, which are employee-led and proactively create a diverse, equitable and inclusive workplace. The company created a Conversations of Understanding program as a way for colleagues to share their perspectives on DEI-related topics. The ERGs have taken responsibility to host CoUs throughout the year so colleagues can learn from one another and increase awareness, empathy and allyship. In 2023, Dentsply Sirona hosted 14 sessions and more than 2,000 employees participated from across the globe.

As part of DS Select, all hiring managers receive a global, standardized interview process including interview guides aligned to company values, a diverse hiring checklist and training on diverse hiring practices. This year, the



company launched DS Sponsor, a program to identify high-potential, emerging talent from diverse backgrounds within the organization and connect them with senior executives to aid leadership exposure and networking opportunities.

As a result of these efforts, Dentsply Sirona has achieved 45% global gender parity with

progress since 2019. In 2023, 54% of global hires were diverse, and Newsweek recognized Dentsply Sirona in its 2024 list of America’s Greatest Workplaces for Diversity.

What is the most challenging part of working in HR these days? One of the most incredible opportunities we have in HR is to partner with our leaders to cultivate an environment that drives a high-performance culture. Employee engagement is the cornerstone of our organization’s performance. We recognize that when employees are engaged, they perform at their highest level. The challenge is striking the right balance between having a performance-focused culture and a supportive culture that attracts and retains its employees.

How is AI impacting the HR profession? Artificial intelligence is an opportunity for greater efficiency and productivity when used ethically and responsibly. Enabling our employees to embrace the potential of AI while being mindful of risks, such as data protection violations and inaccuracies, aligns with our desired high-performance culture. As we explore the integration of AI and develop our employees’ skills accordingly, its impacts are expected to benefit every part of our organization. Strategically, in HR, we have the opportunity to support our organization in defining how we will use AI to drive results and positive impacts on our employees.

FINALIST

Coca-Cola Consolidated Inc.



HR leader:
Christine
Motherwell,
Senior vice
president, human
resources
**Local
employees:**
2,800
**Employees
companywide:**
17,000

Coca-Cola Consolidated Inc., the largest Coca-Cola bottler in the United States, identified the need to strengthen its leadership bench and succession planning. The company makes, sells and distributes more than 300 brands and flavors of beverages to approximately 60 million consumers across 14 states and the District of Columbia.

To continue that work, accelerated leadership development programs were created to build bench strength within the organization. High-potential employees across five levels of leadership are invited to participate in development experiences designed to prepare them for future roles. To ensure an equitable and transparent process for choosing participants, a cross-functional, diverse group of leaders was assembled to serve as the selection review committee. This committee selected cohorts who had sustained high performance and shown high potential to advance. The individuals chosen were diverse demographically, functionally and geographically, including remote teammates. They participated in a year-long set of learning experiences that featured practical projects tackling business challenges, structured mentorship, peer coaching and community-based initiatives.

At the same time, Coke Consolidated established the Foundation of Leadership program aimed at 1,600 employees who lead front-line workers.

Since its inception, 42% of individuals in accelerated leadership programs have either been promoted or seen their work’s scope and scale grow. Another 32% of key middle managers involved in Foundations of Leadership program have advanced in rank or expanded their leadership duties.

FINALIST

Credit Karma

HR leader:
Nicole James,
Chief people
officer
**Local
employees:** 667
**Employees
companywide:**
1,700

Credit Karma’s mission is to empower individuals to make informed money decisions by offering clarity on their personal finances. The company applied the same emphasis on communication to its compensation practices and policies to counter a high employee attrition rate. Prior to 2018, Credit Karma’s employee attrition rates exceeded 35% annually. A key factor in the high turnover was a lack of transparency and consistency in compensation practices. Employees struggled to understand their pay structure, and the compensation system lacked a guiding principle to ensure uniformity across various functions and levels.

Credit Karma’s new approach to pay eliminates bonus targets since that compensation was tied to annual reviews, which are subject to potential managerial bias. Instead, the bonus was integrated into base salaries, converting to a 15% increase in base pay. The company, which was acquired by Intuit Inc. in 2020, has a policy that all employees with the same title, level and geographical location receive identical compensation.

The company also made a commitment to ensure every full-time employee earns at least a living wage. Compensation reviews regularly adjust the salaries of all employees in a role, ensuring that new hires do not earn more than current employees due to superior negotiation skills. A small percentage of employees are recognized financially each year for exceptional impact on the business.

Credit Karma’s focus on compensation clarity resulted in the attrition rate falling below 10%, indicating increased employee satisfaction.

FINALIST

PSA Airlines

HR leader:
Christine Hollanshead, Vice president of talent management

Local employees: 1,694

Employees companywide: 4,949

PSA Airlines is a wholly owned subsidiary of American Airlines Group Inc. with nearly 5,000 team members, including nearly 1,700 in Charlotte. PSA Airlines operates an all-jet fleet, providing over 600 daily flights to nearly 100 destinations on behalf of American Airlines. PSA is a growing company with a 15% increase in flights over the last year.

Increased air travel demand triggered an aggressive hiring spree among major airlines, drawing pilots and maintenance personnel from regional airlines. PSA faced stiff competition to not only retain existing team members but also attract new ones.

The Talent Management team, primarily based in Charlotte, responded to changing recruiting needs in a competitive marketplace and hit the road to meet highly qualified candidates and have authentic conversations about the benefits of flying with PSA, including future careers at American Airlines. The team used a series of variable, experience-based bonuses and a targeted, multichannel marketing and recruitment approach to reach qualified pilots and maintenance technicians.

As a result, PSA Airlines added 1,500 employees in 2023, including pilots, flight attendants, maintenance technicians and staff to support those front-line positions. As a result, the airline is adding more than 20 aircraft back into service and plans to operate more than 200 additional daily flights by the end of the year. For the first time in years, the company is fully staffed to grow.

FINALIST

Truist Financial Corp.



HR leader:
Kimberly Moore-Wright, Chief teammate officer and head of enterprise diversity

Local employees: Undisclosed

Employees companywide: 40,000

Truist Financial Corp. was created through the merger of BB&T Corp. and SunTrust Bank to build a top-10 financial institution serving more than 15 million clients. Since the merger in late 2019, human resources leadership has focused on enhancing the teammate experience, including using intelligent technology to drive performance.

Truist HR invested in a Career Discovery Hub that provides tools for teammates to take charge of their growth and find opportunities aligned to their career aspirations. The Hub includes skills-based insights on job descriptions, career paths, open roles, and networking connections. It also includes one-on-one career coaching and personalized resume reviews.

Since making investments in its talent platform, Truist has had over 325,000 candidates engage online. Potential teammates spend an average of 3.5 minutes on the platform versus less than one minute on the previous platform. Over 185,000 applications have been completed, with 84% of applicants completing the process of applying.

Since 2023, more than 50,000 Truist teammates have used the Career Discovery Hub. Close to 10,000 candidates have applied for open roles from a chatbot on the career site. Almost 40% of job applicants now come through mobile applications.

Truist’s investment in technology and programs has improved the teammate experience for prospective teammates and current teammates.

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WINNER

VIA Health Partners



HR leader:
Cindy L. Tilley,
Vice president
and chief human
resources officer
**Local
employees:** 800
**Employees
companywide:**
956

VIA Health Partners, formerly known as Hospice & Palliative Care Charlotte Region, provides end-of-life and palliative care across 32 counties in North Carolina and South Carolina. The nonprofit organization has struggled to find clinicians, registered nurses, nursing assistants and other staff to care for patients. Recruiting, sourcing, onboarding and training compassionate clinicians has been the organization’s biggest challenge.

To solve the problem, VIA Health Partners built a new human resources information system, or HRIS. The task required rebuilding workflows, templates and job descriptions. The organization launched training for more than 80 leaders.

Early adoption was not easy, but the organization has seen major improvements in the recruiting experience. The pace of hiring has increased from 26.4 monthly hires in 2023 to 33.5 in 2024. Monthly interviews more than doubled through the first half of this year while overall applicant volume dropped, demonstrating an increase in candidate quality. Once candidates apply, the time for a recruiter to contact them was cut from weeks to under 48 hours.



As more qualified candidates interview, the hire ratio has improved 20.5% while the advertising cost per hire has remained flat. More than 80% of those offered a position with VIA Health Partners accept, confirming VIA is a first-choice employer for many applicants. Today, VIA Health Partners has a 4.3% vacancy rate with 900

employees, extraordinarily low for health care.

What’s the most challenging part of working in HR these days? Post pandemic, the field of health care has become more of a challenge. Striking a balance between accommodating our employees’ personal needs and wishes with those of our organization, with, of course, our patients and families always being front and center.

What’s working to retain employees and keep them engaged? For us, our nonprofit, mission and purpose-driven focus is really what makes us stand apart from others. In the hospice field, we are a unicorn in that we are a large, free-standing, independent not-for-profit organization, founded in 1978. That’s while nearly 75% of hospices across the country are for-profit startups, often backed by private equity. We really are special and different, and our employees know we are not here to cut corners on care. Everything we do, we do for our patients/families and as health-care professionals...That’s what really matters to our staff, our clinicians in particular.

How is AI impacting the HR profession? Artificial intelligence is playing a role in our talent acquisition efforts, but it also has proven to be beneficial to our whole organization to better help us serve our patients and families.

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Founded by Vanessa Mathews in 2014 and relocated to Charlotte in 2016, Asfalís has grown from a startup to a national business, achieving significant milestones including the 2023 launch of RLA™ and recognition as the Small Business Enterprise of the Year in 2021.



To further our impact, we are creating six new positions in various departments, contributing over \$600,000 in gross salaries. Join us on October 18th, 2024, at the Dubois Center for a private reception celebrating our anniversary.”

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FINALIST

Atlantic Coast Conference



HR leader: Ellie
Amaguaña,
Associate
commissioner,
human resources
and staff
experience
**Local
employees:** 50

After 70 years headquartered in the Greensboro, the Atlantic Coast Conference announced it would relocate to Charlotte in 2023. The arrival to the Queen City last summer came with the addition of multiple schools to the now 18-member organization. The ACC supports 28 NCAA sports, including 15 for women and 13 for men, and its member institutions span 12 states.

The ACC’s HR team led the staff’s move from Greensboro to Charlotte with a transition policy that included short-term incentives and real estate expense offsets as well as spousal job resources aimed at retention. In total, the ACC retained 66% of its staff and hired 17 new staff members here, proactively pursuing diverse applicants.

For all employees, there’s a new performance management system that includes periodic performance evaluations. For the first time, the ACC deployed an end-of-year performance evaluation process, which was a major step toward accountability that assesses performance, merit and compensation. After 20 years with the previous benefits administrator, the ACC modernized the league’s benefits program by switching to a national partner.

Finally, the ACC launched ‘Creating Conversations’ to promote increased discussions between supervisors and staff, generating transparency and organizational cultural improvement.