2026 Finalists

Company Finalists

Compass Business Solutions
DRAW Collective Architecture
Duquesne University
Gallagher Home Health Services
JML Landscape Management
Literacy Pittsburgh
Metro Community Health Center
Penn Hills Charter School of Entrepreneurship
Point Park University
Propel Schools
Rosedale Technical College
S.R. Snodgrass P.C.
Schmidt Market Research
SoftWriters, Inc.
Turner Dairy Farms
University of Pittsburgh's Talent Acquisition Team
UPMC Pathways to Work

Leader of the Year Finalists

David J. Baker
M.A., SPHR- SCP
Managing Director & CEO
Human Capital Advisors

Lisa M. Garland
MBA, MSL
Director of Talent Acquisition
University of Pittsburgh

Lauren Wright
EdD, SHRM-CP
HR Consultant & Former Chief People Officer

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Companies Celebrated

Employee Engagement & Well-Being Category

This award recognizes organizations that foster a positive, collaborative, and supportive workplace culture through engagement initiatives, wellness programs, effective communication practices, and strategies that empower employees to feel valued, connected, and committed to organizational success.

Compass Business Solutions

Compass Business Solutions developed an initiative centered on maintaining strong connections within the organization and with clients. The company emphasized communication, relationship-building, flexibility, and adaptability to support both employees and clients. Compass found that when human interaction is treated as a strategic priority, internal culture and client outcomes are elevated. The initiative also reinforced that optimal performance is achieved when people feel connected, informed, and aligned around a shared purpose. Moving forward, they will continue focusing on communication and connection as foundational elements of their strategy.

DRAW Collective Architecture

DRAW Collective Architecture launched an initiative focused on cultivating a more inclusive workplace culture through intentional organizational and cultural practices. A notable strategy was the creation of “The Connectors”, a staff sub-group designed to offer rotating leadership opportunities and elevate diverse perspectives, giving participants a direct role in shaping decision-making and leadership development. This approach promotes equity, mentorship, and shared accountability within the firm. The initiative also integrates reflection and continuous improvement, embedding inclusion and belonging into both project work and internal operations. Key takeaways highlight the importance of structured opportunities for participation and leadership, as well as a focus on continuous improvement. DRAW found that empowering employees at multiple levels strengthens both culture and performance. Moving forward, they aim to sustain and expand these practices, refining leadership pathways and maintaining a strong emphasis on belonging as a core organizational value.

Duquesne University

Goodwill: Mission in Action is a collaborative initiative developed by Duquesne University's Division of Mission and Identity and the Office of Human Resources. Designed to reflect and strengthen the University's mission-centered culture, the program invites faculty, staff, and students to perform and share "random acts of kindness" during the holiday season, a time when stress, workload, and personal commitments can impact morale and connection. The initiative's goals were to: (1) foster a culture of gratitude and kindness, (2) increase cross-campus departmental connections, (3) support employee morale during the holiday season, and (4) offer an accessible engagement tool for all to participate. As a low-cost, high-impact initiative, the program has offered a meaningful way to deepen connections across campus. Impact measures include card distribution, story submissions, web engagement, and community feedback. Last year, more than 500 kindness cards were distributed as part of the initiative!

Gallagher Home Health Services, LLC

Gallagher Home Health Services developed an initiative focused on improving organizational culture and service delivery through inclusive practices and employee engagement. By prioritizing communication, staff support, and culturally competent care, the organization enhanced both employee satisfaction and patient outcomes. The initiative emphasized listening to employee feedback and adapting processes to better meet workforce and community needs. One of the biggest lessons learned was the importance of flexibility and responsiveness when implementing change. Gallagher recognized that success depends on continuous dialogue and willingness to adjust strategies. Moving forward, they would continue reinforcing communication channels and maintaining a people-centered approach, ensuring that both staff and patients remain at the heart of their initiatives.

JML Landscape Management

JML Landscape Management's initiative centers on building a strong, inclusive company culture that supports employee growth and engagement. The organization emphasized leadership development, communication, and recognition practices to create a supportive work environment. By fostering a culture of respect and accountability, JML improved employee retention and satisfaction. A key lesson learned is that consistency in leadership and communication is essential for sustaining cultural change. The company found that investing in employees—through training, feedback, and recognition—yields long-term benefits. Moving forward, JML would continue prioritizing these strategies while refining processes to further strengthen alignment between leadership and staff.

Point Park University

Point Park University implemented a series of targeted, incremental changes designed to strengthen employee engagement and overall workplace experience. Rather than relying on sweeping reforms, the university focused on practical, people-centered adjustments across programs, policies, and daily interactions that collectively support employee success. These efforts included refining internal processes, enhancing communication, and ensuring that employee voices and diverse perspectives are meaningfully reflected in decision-making. This work is grounded in a clear belief: when our people thrive, our organization thrives. By creating an environment where employees feel supported, valued, and empowered, Point Park can strengthen engagement, performance, and institutional impact. A key lesson learned is that adaptability and responsiveness are essential. Small, intentional shifts in how we support and engage employees can reveal larger opportunities for growth and improvement. Moving forward, the university will continue to leverage this iterative approach, emphasizing continuous feedback, leadership accountability, and ongoing refinement. By maintaining a flexible, people-first strategy, Point Park ensures that its efforts remain relevant, responsive, and aligned with the evolving needs of its employees and the broader university community.

Propel Schools

Propel Schools' Propel Your Health Wellness Program is a comprehensive wellness initiative designed to bolster employee engagement, retention, and sustainability across Propel Schools' 600 staff members. By linking holistic well-being to mission-driven cost containment, the program addresses the unique burnout risks of the K-12 environment through an integrated mobile platform with an annual wellness scorecard. Participants earn incentives through activities like preventive care, movement, and mental health initiatives. The program's success is anchored in a peer-led "Wellness Champion" model and a multi-channel communication strategy, resulting in a two-thirds participation rate among full-time staff, with 98.7% reporting satisfaction and 98% reporting positive health behavior changes.

Schmidt Market Research

Schmidt Market Research’s initiative is built on a clear belief: culture is shaped through consistent, everyday actions. Rather than relying on large-scale programs, the organization prioritizes everyday practices that strengthen connection, recognition, and trust. These practices include intentional communication, regular celebrations, opportunities for employee input, and a flexible hybrid work model that supports work-life harmony. Well-being is reinforced through employee-centered benefits and policies designed to reduce stress and support employees across life stages. Schmidt has found that consistency, not complexity, drives meaningful gains in engagement, morale, and retention. Schmidt plans to continue these efforts while exploring additional ways to enhance employee experience.

Companies Celebrated

Talent Recruitment & Acquisition Category

This award recognizes organizations that excel at sourcing, attracting, and hiring top talent by using innovative strategies, such as employer branding, data-driven recruitment, candidate experience improvements, and strategic partnerships.

Rosedale Technical College

Rosedale Technical College's initiative centers on student success and workforce readiness. By aligning programs with industry needs, the college ensures that students are prepared for careers. A key takeaway is the importance of aligning education with real-world outcomes. Rosedale plans to continue strengthening partnerships and refining programs to support student achievement.

S.R. Snodgrass P.C.

S.R. Snodgrass developed the IMPACT Summer Leadership Program to cultivate leadership skills and promote inclusion. The program provides participants with hands-on experience and mentorship opportunities, fostering professional growth. A key takeaway is the value of experiential learning in developing future leaders. The organization found that structured programs can effectively support both individual and organizational development. Moving forward, they plan to continue and expand the program.

University of Pittsburgh – Talent Acquisition

The University of Pittsburgh's Talent Acquisition team focused on benchmarking and strategic planning to enhance recruitment practices. Early benchmarking proved critical in identifying opportunities and setting goals. The initiative emphasizes data-driven decision-making and continuous improvement. A key lesson is that strong foundational analysis supports effective strategy development. Moving forward, the team aims to refine processes and expand efforts to attract diverse talent.

UPMC Pathways to Work

UPMC Pathways to Work addresses community workforce needs by providing training and employment opportunities. The initiative focuses on accessibility and support, helping individuals overcome barriers to employment. A key lesson learned is the significant demand for such programs within the community. Moving forward, UPMC aims to expand its reach and enhance program offerings to better serve participants.

Companies Celebrated

Diversity & Inclusion Category

This award Reecognizes organizations that value and promote differences in ethnicity, gender, age, disability, national origin, sexual orientation, education, and religion, creating diverse perspectives and work experiences.

Metro Community Health Center

Metro Community Health Center's initiative centers on embedding inclusion into both strategy and daily operations. The organization moved beyond symbolic commitments by explicitly naming inclusion as a priority and aligning internal processes to support it. Efforts included staff engagement, culturally responsive care practices, and operational changes that ensure equity is consistently applied in service delivery. The initiative emphasizes meeting community needs through accessible, patient-centered care while fostering a workplace culture where employees feel represented and valued. A key learning was that intentionality—clearly defining inclusion and reinforcing it through systems—drives sustainable change. Metro found success in aligning leadership, communication, and accountability structures, ensuring inclusion is not episodic but continuous. Moving forward, they would continue prioritizing operational integration of equity practices while refining measurement strategies to better track impact and outcomes.

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Pittsburgh, PA 15218

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Learning & Professional Development Category

This award recognizes companies that go above and beyond to invest in their employees through in-house learning, continuing education programs, and new innovative learning practices.

Penn Hills Charter School of Entrepreneurship

Penn Hills Charter School of Entrepreneurship developed a comprehensive development initiative to strengthen its internal teacher pipeline, improve retention, and better prepare early-career educators for classroom leadership. Centered on a Gradual Release Coaching model, the program provides personalized coaching, mentorship, and targeted professional learning aligned to paraprofessionals' and instructional support teachers' strengths, growth areas, and career goals. The initiative was launched in response to declining promotion rates and rising turnover, ensuring early career and aspiring teachers gain the confidence, skills, and support needed to transition successfully into lead teaching roles. Ultimately, this approach builds instructional capacity, stabilizes staffing, and enhances student outcomes through consistent, high-quality teaching.

SoftWriters, Inc.

The SoftWriters Innovation Showcase was created as part of our transformation into a leading AI-native organization. Designed to empower employees at every level, the Showcase invited team members to propose high-impact, AI-driven ideas that could meaningfully advance our business and the LTC pharmacy industry. Announced in August, the competition ran from September through December. More than fifty ideas were submitted, resulting in twenty-four finalists presenting in December. The SoftWriters People Team designed the full program, including AI policy guardrails, scoring criteria, and structured weekly coaching and development support. Winners were selected in mid-December, and all five of the top five projects are high-impact initiatives that are now in active implementation. The SoftWriters Innovation Showcase was more than an internal competition, it was a scalable learning architecture that empowered 30% of our team to develop creative, high-impact solutions while strengthening cross-functional and responsible Clinical Grade AI adoption. Through hands-on learning, structured coaching and meaningful business outcomes, the Showcase enabled employees to leverage their creativity to unlocking AI velocity to deliver measurable value with rigorous standards for the LTC pharmacy industry. SoftWriters is cultivating innovators and teachers at every level – embodying the spirit of Engaging Pittsburgh’s Creative HR Practices.

Companies Celebrated

Team Category

This award recognizes teams that demonstrate integrity, ingenuity, and creativity.

Literacy Pittsburgh

Literacy Pittsburgh's team initiative aims to expand access to adult education while boosting program effectiveness through collaboration. The team implemented coordinated strategies to improve service delivery, ensuring learners receive consistent, high-quality instruction tailored to their needs. Data supports these efforts: last year, 58% more students transitioned to post-secondary education or job training. The organizational structure fosters cross-team collaboration, clear communication, and a focus on strategic goals. Cross-departmental workgroups develop, implement, and evaluate these goals, promoting engagement and shared ownership. Open dialogue and feedback help Literacy Pittsburgh provide a high-quality experience for students, volunteers, and staff, earning the agency strong survey ratings. By encouraging communication, investing in professional development, and aligning responsibilities with strategic goals, Literacy Pittsburgh has built a team environment dedicated to student success.

Schmidt Market Research

Schmidt Market Research's team initiative reflects a deliberate approach to building a collaborative, high-performing culture rooted in consistency, accountability, and shared ownership. As a small organization, the team operates as one unified group, prioritizing strong communication, shared accountability, and alignment with organizational goals. Team members regularly step in to support one another across roles, showing flexibility and a collective commitment to delivering results. This is supported by a trust-based hybrid work model, requiring only seven in-office days per month, which helps balance productivity with work–life harmony. Ongoing participation, engagement, and performance outcomes help inform decisions, while cultural practices such as celebrations and connection-focused traditions foster an inclusive environment that strengthens teamwork, effectiveness, and long-term success.

Turner Dairy Farms

Amid an increasingly competitive hiring environment, the team at Turner Dairy Farms successfully navigated significant staffing challenges in 2025, particularly for driver roles impacted by a tight labor market and unavoidable losses due to injury and illness. These challenges intensified during the back-to-school season, when demand for drivers increased due to expanded school routes. In response, the team implemented creative recruiting strategies, including employee-driven referral efforts, to attract qualified CDL drivers, Drivers in Training, and Driver Helpers. Leadership also strengthened collaboration by holding weekly staffing meetings, which improved communication, built trust, and enabled quick responses to evolving needs. Throughout the process, the team remained committed to the company's core values, prioritizing quality hires while supporting employees facing health-related challenges. Ultimately, their perseverance and teamwork resulted in a fully staffed driver workforce, ensuring reliable service, demonstrating strong leadership, and reinforcing a commitment to continuous improvement in workforce planning and staffing strategies.

Leaders Celebrated

This award recognizes leaders who demonstrate integrity, ingenuity, and creativity.



David J. Baker
M.A., SPHR-SCP
Managing Director & CEO
Human Capital Advisors

David Baker demonstrates integrity, ingenuity, and people-centered leadership through his commitment to flexibility, trust, and high-performance culture. He designs work structures that empower employees with autonomy while maintaining clear expectations and accountability, enabling strong results without sacrificing well-being. His innovative approach to complex HR challenges emphasizes collaboration, aligning team members' strengths to deliver thoughtful, client-centered solutions that drive business growth and referrals. David fosters psychological safety by encouraging open dialogue, learning, and thoughtful risk-taking. Known for his accessibility and coaching mindset, he invests deeply in employee development both professionally and personally. He consistently leads with courage and ethical conviction, even in difficult situations. By aligning his values with daily operations, David has built a culture rooted in integrity, trust, and exceptional service.



Lisa Garland
Director of Talent Acquisition
University of Pittsburgh

Lisa Garland demonstrates exceptional leadership by building a high-performing Talent Acquisition team grounded in accountability, development, and resilience. She introduced data-driven practices, including weekly metrics reviews, creating transparency and a shared standard for continuous improvement. During institutional disruption, including a hiring freeze, Lisa redirected her team's efforts toward professional development, process improvement, and cross-functional initiatives, strengthening long-term capability. She champions flexible, individualized work structures that support well-being while maintaining service excellence. Lisa fosters strong relationships across the university, positioning Talent Acquisition as a strategic partner and earning high satisfaction from stakeholders. Her leadership emphasizes evidence-based decision-making, meaningful engagement, and a culture of continuous learning. Through intentional culture-building and investment in her team, Lisa has driven both performance and a highly engaged, resilient workforce.



Lauren Wright
EdD, SHRM-CP
HR Consultant
Former Chief People Officer

Lauren Wright exemplifies transformational leadership through her ability to build trust, strengthen culture, and deliver measurable organizational impact. Upon joining the Children's Institute, she conducted listening tours and leveraged data to implement strategic initiatives, including a centralized Training & Development function, enhanced onboarding, and workforce analytics. Her efforts improved early retention from 59% to 95% and increased engagement and recognition participation. Lauren fosters psychological safety, empowers diverse perspectives, and develops talent across HR functions, positioning her team as a trusted organizational partner. She is widely recognized for her empathy, accessibility, and commitment to employee growth, often serving as a strong advocate for staff at the executive level. Through transparent communication, innovative programs, and courageous decision-making, Lauren has rebuilt trust, elevated culture, and advanced organizational sustainability.