

Business



WORK TRENDS

Making the jobs market more human again

Rising unemployment during the second Trump administration puts threat of AI competition in stark relief

By Nick Thomas

Brutal, “disheartening,” even “traumatic” — these are just some of the daily descriptions, on platforms such as LinkedIn, about searches for decent white-collar work.

It’s a problem compounded by the rising unemployment rate during President Donald Trump’s second, nonconsecutive term. U.S. unemployment in

November 2025 reached a four-year high of 4.6%. That’s up from 4.4% in September, the last month the Labor Department reported for that metric.

The jobs news wasn’t all gloomy. Employers added 64,000 jobs in November, more than many economists predicted. Still, that’s hardly enough to ease the apprehension of a tight labor market and the accompanying indignities of modern job-searching.

The endless applications for jobs with apparently already hundreds of other applicants. The ghosting of applicants. Then, if you’re lucky enough to even receive a “thanks but no thanks” response of rejection, there’s a conciliatory note saying how strong your background is. This often only results in the applicant feeling worse.

Is the world of work broken? If it is, why? And what can be done about it?

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“LinkedIn applications are up 45% year-on-year, but the silence is what breaks people,” said Logan Currie, founder and chief operations officer of recruitment company Careerspan. “When you do everything ‘right’ and still get zero back, confidence evaporates, and then you start questioning whether the problem is really you.”

Artificial intelligence, of course, takes some of the blame for the current situation. As the technology explodes — ever been interviewed by an AI bot? — HR humans can also be seemingly dumbfounded as to how best to use it when it comes to job seekers. When their systems fail to align with the right candidates, not least because the companies are using AI systems to inadequately screen resumes and are filled to the brim with AI-generated applications, overloading seekers is the natural consequence. So much so that a company may receive hundreds of applications, but even fail to hire as the person it really wants has not been able to stick their head above the parapet in all the morass.

A recent study from Dartmouth College and Princeton University ana-

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lyzed 2.7 million job applications and found that carefully customized applications are increasingly losing out to the ChatGPT jobs approach. Top performers now get hired 19% less often, while weaker performers slip through the net 14% more often.

“The system is literally inverting merit,” Currie said.

Not that long ago, during the latter period of the COVID-19 pandemic, there were more jobs and hiring than ever, claims Michael Bruni of Talent Acquisition Strategies. If anything, however, there was significant overhiring, and that, combined with persistent economic uncertainty, has contributed to job creation stagnation as increasing amounts of talent remain jobless, he said.

Overall, job creation is continuing, but economic uncertainty remains.

“Employers are exhibiting caution — slowing hiring, pulling back on inclusive hiring initiatives, and shoring up balance sheets in anticipation of a possible downturn,” said Alison Lands, vice president in the employer mobilization practice at Jobs for the Future.

Still, there are positions out there, but the broken recruitment system is exacerbating the problem. When some job seekers are even paying money to get AI to send hundreds of applications for them daily, or AI customizes cover letters, it’s almost like there is a war between the job seekers and the employers who don’t really have the processes in hand to deal with the AI overload, sources say.

“The AI is not where it needs to be, as there is this weird misalignment between those with valuable domain expertise not knowing how to optimize their resumes for AI that’s taking over the first pass in the hiring process,” said Cali Williams Yost, founder and CEO of New Jersey-based Flex + Strategy Group. “We have a broken tech-enabled system.”

LABOR SHORTAGE?

Conversely, the current, often depressing race for white-collar jobs is contradicted by an inherent weakness in the longer-term jobs market.

While there may be some truth to

the narrative that AI is taking over some entry-level white-collar jobs — recent college graduates, for example, are experiencing higher unemployment than non-college-educated workers — the labor force is actually facing a possible major shortfall in suitable worker availability only a few years down the line.

For example, 2025 may have been the first year in U.S. history to record net negative immigration, said Scott Siff, founder and CEO of Washington, D.C.-based Pivoters, a recruitment group focused on workers 55 and over. With birth rates well below the replacement level of 2.2, he adds, the worker supply is actually “falling off the cliff.”

This situation may be particularly acute in the career stages of younger professionals who have been working for two to three years and then want to move on to more complex and developed roles, Jost said. Who is going to replace them if AI has taken over some of the entry-level roles?

Also, as skilled baby boomers and Gen Xers start to retire, they will give way to Gen Z and Gen Alpha, those born between 2010 and 2024, who are smaller cohorts. Georgetown University estimates that a dire 5.25 million skilled, college-educated workers will be missing in the workforce by 2032.

WHO CAN HELP?

All future possible labor shortages aside, the situation remains apparently dire for out-of-work white-collar workers right now.

Policy solutions seem few and far between, with efforts largely fixed on job creation rather than solving problems within the hiring infrastructure itself. AI, with its massive ability to change at lightning speed, is also something very difficult to legislate for, even as some states are mandating disclosure in AI-hiring processes, sources say.

Any policy, therefore, to help with jobs could still come from creating a healthier economy to boost the basics of supply and demand.

“AI is nine steps ahead of you, and we are not going to be able to build much of a policy on that because of that,” said An-

drew Crapuchettes, founder of Moscow, Idaho-based jobs board and recruiter Red Balloon. “More important may be to build an economy that is cracking on so that we can hire the talented people we so desperately need to; the market will work it out if the economy is strong.”

There are some steps at the congressional level designed to effect the deep structural change needed. Steve Taylor, of the higher education and economic mobility practice at the Stand Together Trust, points to possible bipartisan updates on the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act aimed at streamlining programs.

But real change is much more likely to come from companies themselves. Rather than rely on policymakers, the solutions to the current problems should be placed at the door of the employers, Currie said.

“The harder truth is that employers built this system,” she said. “They’ll have to be the ones willing to redesign it.”

Hiring has to be made human again, said Viktorija Speteliunaite, a human resources director at FL Technics Dominican Republic. FL Technics is a Lithuania-based global aviation maintenance provider.



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—Career coach, Elizabeth Harders

“Competitive pay, human-centered hiring, and employer-funded skill development consistently attract strong candidate interest, even in new industries,” she said.

Her words were backed up by Sam Caucci, CEO and founder of 1Huddle, an AI-powered training platform. There needs to be a shift from credential-based hiring to skills-based evaluation, he said.

“Shorter audition-style assessments, fewer degree requirements, and clearer pathways for internal mobility,” he said. “When companies hire for potential and commit to real development, more candidates can compete, and more roles can be filled.”

What’s clear is that workers looking for new roles cannot solely depend on government policy to help them out anytime soon, said Liz Eversoll, CEO at skills-based careers group Career Highways. There will have to be a strong partnership between the government and the private sector to ensure an employee-friendly job application system and decent job availability.

“Government can encourage skills-first practices, but employers need modern tools to put those policies into action,” Eversoll said. “The future of work will be shaped by organizations that make skills transparent, pathways visible, and upskilling accessible to everyone.”

WORKER PIVOT

It’s clearly a very difficult time for white-collar workers out of the job market, but there are things they can do to try and turn things around, and much of that depends on the old-fashioned approaches of human-centered things such as networking, sources say.

More experienced workers may be better suited to such networking and relationship-building because that is something they may have relied on more in the past, rather than younger generations who have grown up in a completely different, more technology-based environment.

Laid-off workers can also narrowly define themselves and limit their opportunities as a result. It’s not easy, but job

seekers can help themselves by taking their own career audit.

“I’d encourage employees going through the process to take a more complete, insightful view of who they are and what they are meant to do,” said Pat Lencioni, an author and workplace expert. “To do that, they need to see themselves in terms of the unique, transferable gifts they’ve been given, which can be applied to a wide variety of jobs in just about any industry.”

Again, the key is building a work environment that helps professionals build meaningful connections and a sense of belonging, something that can offer help when job seekers are networking for jobs as well as when they are at work.

The security industry is a prime example of such, said Elli Reges, director of learning and development at the Security Industry Association, an industry body that represents over 1,600 companies involved in global security solutions.

“When you talk to people who have built their careers here, many say the same thing,” Reges said. “They stay because of the people — colleagues, customers, and partners who make this industry feel both purposeful and community-oriented.”

Until, perhaps, such community-building and a better focus on the employee become a more common thing, the white-collar jobs market may remain gloomy for a while to come.

“There is something fundamentally broken with the labor market today, particularly for those out of work,” Crapuchettes said. “There is a significant amount of noise, and unfortunately, many humans are being left out of the market.”

And much of that noise is coming from the AI-influenced recruitment system.

“Until we fix the systemic friction in how candidates are evaluated, we’ll continue to see talent discouraged, burned out, or sidelined, not because they lack ability, but because they can’t get past the digital gatekeepers,” career coach Elizabeth Harders said. ★

Nick Thomas is a writer based in Denver.