

UNLEASH America 2024

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UNLEASH America, dubbed the “International Festival of HR” brings together HR leaders from across the country (and a few from around the globe), alongside industry influencers, analysts, and HR technology vendors to talk about HR strategy and innovation.

This year’s event took place at Caesar’s Forum in Las Vegas and featured over 200 speakers spanning 14 stages, but was the juice worth the squeeze? We explore that, and more, in this event briefing.

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The Verdict:



If you're a leader in talent, skills, or learning, this conference is specifically designed for. It will likely have most of the tech vendors you want to connect with in attendance, along with sessions led by your peers discussing real-world, timely challenges.



If you're in another discipline inside HR (payroll, compensation, benefits, etc.), this may not be as valuable to you.



Is this event for you?

Billed as “The International Festival of HR,” the event missed the “festival” and the totality of “HR.” This year, UNLEASH America leaned heavily into the Talent arena, with a slew of sessions, speakers, and vendors dedicated to talent acquisition, talent management, talent mobility, learning and development, and skills.

Outside these segments, it was slim pickings. Payroll, for example, is on the minds of many HR tech buyers, especially those exploring earned wage access (EWA). Yet there were only four payroll sessions across the entire conference. Of the 164 exhibitors listed for the event, 71 were in Recruitment and Talent, while another 16 were in Learning and Skills, representing a total of 53% of the vendors attending.



Nudging HR closer to AI

In terms of topics, all the usual suspects were there — skills, talent experience, learning, performance — but AI took center stage with nearly every session incorporating it into the talk track in some way. And UNLEASH seemed to be nudging HR to move away from the comforts of the risk-averse shallow end of the AI pool and instead look for ways to safely explore the deeper waters of AI.

- Wharton Professor Ethan Mollick showed how AI is a jagged frontier, demonstrating in front a live audience some of the practical applications it can handle very well (such as arguing persuasively), as well as the areas it struggles with (such as understanding word counts). The only way for us to find out what AI does well, and what it doesn't, is to **try it at an individual level**. To do this, there needs to be a strong amount of trust inside an organization.
- Mark Blyth, Professor of International Economics at Brown University, reinforced this idea that AI needs to be embraced inside the HR community. He walked through the economics of innovation, citing how **every technological advancement we've seen has resulted in more jobs**, not fewer. This is likely to be true for AI as well. But to keep up with the rising need for talent amidst an aging population, organizations will have to embrace technology and create work environments focused on retention of knowledge and skills, making HR's role even more critical.



**AI is good that stuff
you wouldn't expect.**



— Ethan Mollick, Associate Professor
at the Wharton School of the University
of Pennsylvania



Our winner, Manifest, stood out to me almost immediately. Not just in terms of how compelling the pitch was, but the idea itself being something that is truly unique and, frankly, accessible to companies and employees in a moment where cost and spend is tight in these organizations.



— Rebecca Carr, UNLEASH Startup Awards chair and CEO & Chief Product Officer at SmartRecruiters



Meet the next generation of innovators

What makes UNLEASH America a unique conference is their dedication to amplifying the startup community. Early-stage vendors are often the biggest disruptors of the industry, bringing current ideas, new ways of working and new categories to the space. At UNLEASH, these innovators aren't relegated to the corner where maybe a handful of people walk by. Instead, they're front and center lining the walkway into the main stage, attracting attention from all kinds of attendees throughout the event.

In addition to the startup booth placement, there were also the UNLEASH Startup Awards, in which five finalist organizations competed for bragging rights and a prize worth \$50,000. **Manifest**, a company out of Chicago whose product helps transfer retirement accounts, saving both employers and employees money, was crowned the winner. If the name sounds familiar, they were also the winners of Pitchfest at the HR Technology Conference in 2023. Runners up included Chezuba (a corporate social responsibility platform), Welliba (an employee listening and experience platform), Juicebox (makers of PeopleGPT, an AI-powered people search engine) and Taiwa (an AI-powered coaching platform).



Vendor happenings

Exhibiting vendors had a lot to share. A few updates of note included:

- **Reejig** earned the award for breaking barriers with their booth. CEO, Siobhan Savage's kids joined her at UNLEASH this year and helped keep attendees refreshed with their one-of-a-kind lemonade stand. This was such a fun, and human way to connect with attendees while highlighting how important it is to find the right flow between work and life, and to know when to bring them together.
- **JobPixel** made AI real, as well as useful, by sharing how they're using generative AI to immediately translate onboarding and recruiting videos to any language, making them accessible globally.
- **Paradox** showcased their conversational ATS and CRM capabilities, highlighting how technology can make interactions more human. Meanwhile, their client, FedEx, brought the evidence in their session dedicated to how and why they launched their conversational ATS.
- **Canva** gave attendees something to think about with their enterprise offering to support recruitment branding, communications and people experience. A newcomer to the HR-tech conference circuit, and a welcome one.
- **HireEZ** gave attendees a close up look at their recently launched CRM, hireEZ 2. This release extended the platform's capabilities beyond sourcing to provide recruiters with robust analytics and AI-powered candidate engagement.
- **Quantum Workplace** headed into the event with a newly earned Stevie® Award in hand for its customer service, and another for its AI-driven engagement analytics solution, Smart Summary.
- **Flockity**, who recently won HR.com's FutureHR Startup Competition, was in full force in the startup area talking to attendees about how to bring influencer marketing to recruiting.

Just as noteworthy were the vendors that were not exhibiting — from big HCM players like Workday and Dayforce, to more specialized vendors like Beamery, Workhuman, Walkme, Lattice, Paylocity and others. Their absence left the expo floor feeling less energetic than usual and created more fragmentation across the community.



**HR just like anything
else is changing.**



— Earvin ‘Magic’ Johnson,
NBA legend and closing keynote
speaker



Key talent sessions

This year’s conference featured two areas dedicated solely to talent acquisition and talent technology, making this a primary highlight of the show. If you’re looking to catch up on sessions you missed, here are a few we recommend:

Talent acquisition:

- Wendy Mayer, VP of Candidate Experience at Pfizer, shared strategies for using AI to help with sourcing, screening and talent selection
- Rachel Allen, Director of Talent Acquisition at 7-Eleven, shared their experience in shifting to a conversational ATS model to help with their high-volume recruitment
- Heather Yurko, the VP of Digital Talent at Mastercard, shared strategies for moving away from rigid requirements of old, like degrees, toward more modern, skills-based hiring practices
- Jeff Moore, VP of Talent Acquisition at Toast, shared how he’s building his talent tech stack around the Candidate Relationship Manager (CRM) and not the Applicant Tracking System (ATS) in order to create a self-sustaining talent model

Talent management:

- Jeff Orlando, Chief Learning Officer at Bristol Myers Squibb, explored the world of leadership development, sharing how companies are investing in creating the next generation of leaders and why it’s so important to nurture diverse and socially responsible leadership
- Sadia Ayaz, EVP and Chief Human Resources Officer at IES, outlined how they’re leveraging conversational AI to go beyond just high-volume hiring to nurture candidates, onboard new employees and drive employee survey participation to aid in employee listening
- TaQuonda Hill, General Manager of IT Transformation at Delta Air Lines, discussed the need for employee readiness, citing the link between a workforce’s preparedness and adaptability, and organizational agility and success



Our advice

To HR and talent leaders:

UNLEASH America remains a relevant conference for leaders interested in driving strategic change inside their organization. The size and scale make it easy to navigate the expo floor and connect with the vendors that are most suited to address your challenges, especially if you're a talent leader. If you're an HR leader, you'll find fewer sessions dedicated to the HR craft and fewer HR-specific vendors outside the talent space.

However, as with most conferences, it can be easy to get swept up in industry jargon and the feature/function race across vendors. To avoid that noise, push vendors you speak with to share real client stories and outcomes with you. Seek out the sessions where case studies are highlighted, and real-life scenarios are shared to help you navigate obstacles you might not realize lie ahead.

To HR tech vendors:

Break away from convention. The market is craving connection. They want to find true partners to help them solve their challenges, so vendors need to find new ways to connect that are new and unexpected. Branded pens and fun mascots aren't enough to draw them in. You need to be creating experiences they'll remember and talking about real topics that keep attendees up at night.

Bring real innovation. The market wants to see "how things have always been" be flipped on its head, not just automated or reskinned to look better.

Let your customers tell your stories, especially in the conference sessions. HR and talent tech buyers are fatigued. They're overwhelmed with technology options, messaging that all sounds similar, and not much guidance on how to find the solution that addresses their concerns. They're skeptical, and they're reluctant to join a session where they expect they'll be sold to. Instead, they want to hear from their peers and learn how other organizations are navigating these challenges.

To the UNLEASH team:

The speakers for this year's conference were timely and relevant, with engaging content and great takeaways. That said, the American conference lacked the X factor that gets people so excited about UNLEASH world. The event was missing a community focus, leaving it feeling more transactional than in previous years. The event app wasn't launched until just days before the show went live, making it difficult to plan for the conference, and even then, important things (like meals) weren't listed. Key events that you would expect to be highly publicized, such as the UNLEASH Startup Awards, ended up getting lost in the sea of other content and sessions. We would love to see the UNLEASH team bring some of the magic that happens in Europe to the American conference, inserting more creativity, community, thoughtfulness into the experience.

Also, location matters. Without a hotel attached to the conference, attendees were spread throughout Las Vegas leaving them craving community without a viable outlet through the venue. Attendees traveling alone run the risk of feeling isolated, and after-hours event coordination was a disaster with too many things happening in too many places for people to connect in a meaningful way.



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