MILKEN INSTITUTE

NOVEMBER 2025

Employer Investments:

Building Business, Employee, and Community Resilience

Gabby Hines, Sabrina Spitaletta, and Lena Flaum

Context: Emerging and Escalating Risks for Employers

As employers strive to build competitive and scalable workplaces globally, investing in their people and surrounding communities can drive impact both inside and outside their organizations. By proactively addressing emerging and escalating risks, employers can strengthen resilience and boost performance for individuals, their businesses, and the communities they serve. Their unique role and reach as trusted entities enable them to mitigate risk, build resilience, and advance health priorities in several ways. This can be done internally through policies, programs, and organizational culture, and externally through business or community investments and raising industry or sector standards.

Present

As part of our ongoing Employer Action Exchange (EAE) work, we conducted an ongoing landscape analysis that included a literature review of more than 230 academic, industry, and news sources from 2010 to 2025 to assess past, current, and future risks that employers may face. The literature review is not only a time capsule for analyzing impacts of major global and domestic events (e.g., impacts of the Great Recession, international conflict, and the COVID-19 pandemic) but also a tool to look toward the future. Relevant insight can be gained by analyzing how employers prepared for these risks and the subsequent impact on employee well-being, external communities, and their businesses. In addition to considering the past, the analysis also identified omnipresent risks that employers may face. Collectively, these sources illuminate risk areas that are both emerging and escalating in nature, with the potential to become ubiquitous across the employer ecosystem.

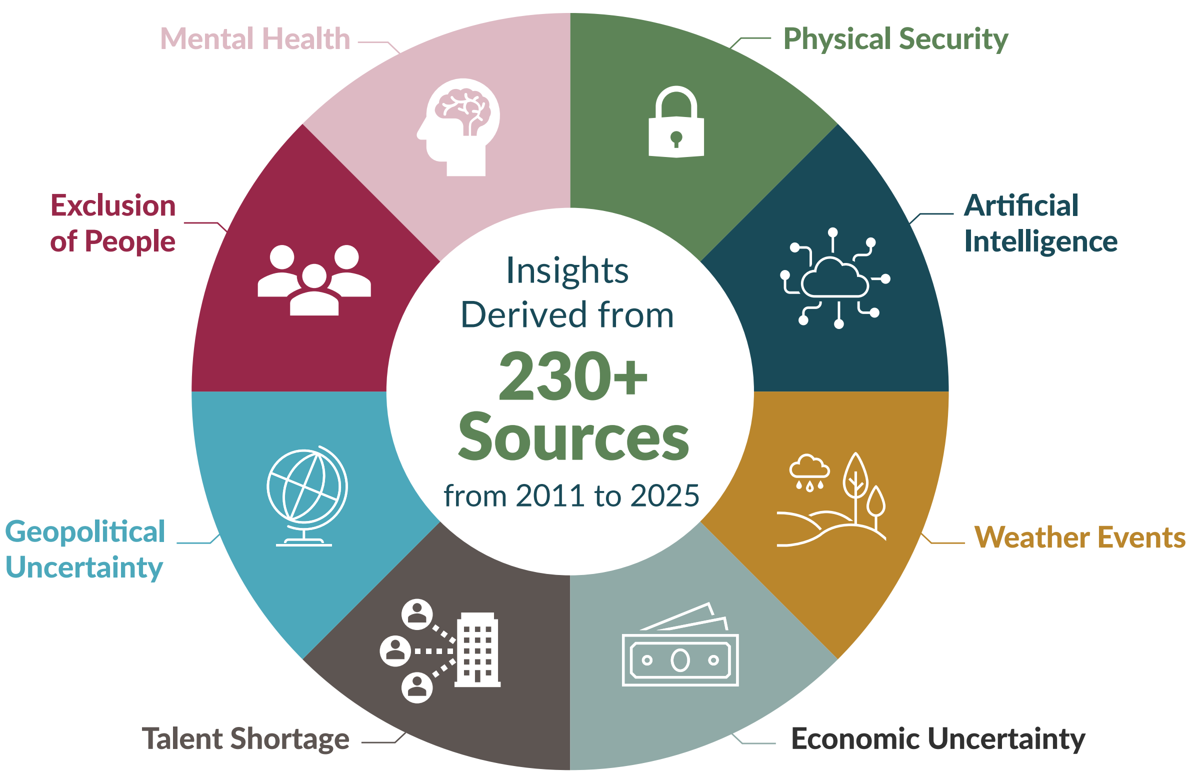
Past

The Milken Institute started to explore themes of employer risk, resilience, and health as early as 2017, prior to the EAE platform's formal launch. This foundational employer work has surfaced insights through multiple approaches, including curated convenings, long-term projects, meetings with key leaders, local to global initiatives, and interviews. The quality, consistency, and depth of our engagement during the past nine years have produced a robust body of work and helped reshape how employers see their role as partners in health. Across the evolving transformations of the 21st century—a fast-paced and quickly changing environment—we have discussed how employers can incorporate these ideas into strategic action that advances the health and performance of employees, communities, and ultimately their businesses.

Future

This brief was influenced by our foundational employer work and the key findings from our current landscape analysis, which included input from employers across various industries and sectors on their priorities and needs. The intention is to build interest in upstream investments and actions. The brief highlights eight intersecting emerging and escalating risks (i.e., key risks) for employers to consider (see Figure 1). The last section of the brief provides links to related EAE-led publications containing insights from executives across sectors and tangible actions that leaders can take to advance health priorities and performance, regardless of organization size.

Figure 1. Emerging and Escalating Risks Facing Employers: Insights from the Past 14 Years



Source: Milken Institute analysis of insights derived from academic articles, news articles, reports, blogs, videos, seminars, newsletters, and surveys (2025)

Key Risks

The eight key risks influence the health, well-being, and performance of people, communities, and businesses. They are deeply interconnected, although each risk has its own unique effects. Insight into each risk enhances insight into its collective effects. Therefore, employers should address the risks holistically so that both the internal workplace community and the broader external ecosystem can benefit meaningfully.

Physical Security

Employers are empowered to create both a physically and psychologically safe environment for employees and the broader community. When employers fail to mitigate the risk of harm, employees cannot fully engage with their work, ultimately affecting business performance. A genuine and continued commitment to safety signals that the organization values its employees, which not only protects the health and well-being of individuals but also fosters a sense of trust. Failing to prioritize safety erodes the trust held by employees and the external community, ultimately affecting the bottom line.

Artificial Intelligence

Artificial intelligence (AI) is significantly changing the ways in which we work. Organizations face risks posed by both adopting and not adopting emerging technology. However, what remains ubiquitous is the need for employers to listen to their employees and the communities they serve when adopting and integrating new technologies. This active listening helps ensure their voices guide current and future use of technology, impacting both the workforce and the external community they reach.

Weather Events

By adopting risk mitigation strategies across their organizations, businesses can enhance their resilience against adverse weather events and prepare employees and the communities they serve. Weather events are becoming more severe and frequent, with prominent impacts on the health of people and communities.

Employers should recognize that the environment is intrinsically connected to the performance of people. For example, extreme heat can negatively affect productivity, even for indoor workers, causing a 2–3 percent decline in performance for each degree increase in temperature (above 77-degree F). In addition to physical health, mental health is affected by exposure to disaster. In a study of Floridians, individuals who experienced just two hurricanes showed a direct correlation with increased mental health problems and functional impairment in work and social settings. Although weather events have and always will pose risk, the proactive preparation of strategic infrastructure and the workforce ultimately determines an organization’s ability to withstand and thrive in the face of weather events.

Economic Uncertainty

Another risk that employers should consider is the turbulence of the global economy, especially because economic uncertainty reached an all-time high in April 2025, surpassing the uncertainty surrounding the 2008 financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, according to the World Uncertainty Index. Although organizations may suffer from economic turbulence, employers should recognize that they are the source of financial security for their employees. Therefore, they should proactively and transparently communicate the implications of economic uncertainty. Doing so instills a sense of certainty and trust between employees and employers, enabling individuals and organizations to perform at their peak and remain resilient.

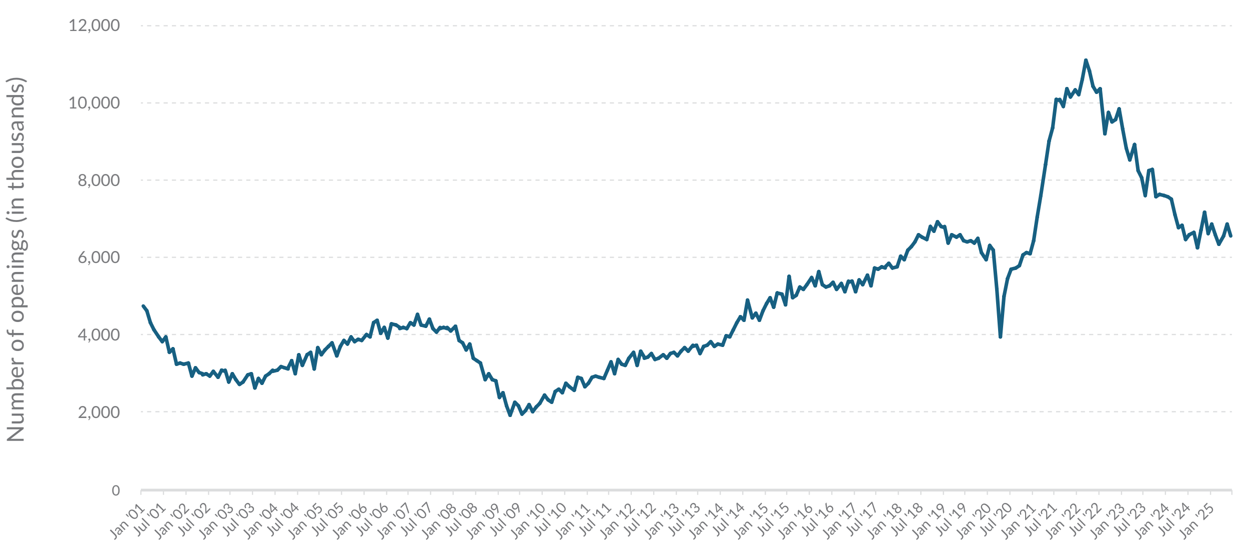
Integrating accessible, iterative trainings within and beyond orientation builds skill sets, refreshes learning, and protects the long-term well-being of workers. Resources should remain accessible after their first introduction to the workforce.

Talent Shortage

Many contributing factors impact the talent shortage; one is the rapid growth of AI. While AI is often framed as an advancement that may take jobs, its expansion is expected to require a skill set that will, in fact, widen the existing talent gap. At the same time, certain aspects of human performance remain essential and cannot be fully replaced by technology. The dimension of the talent shortage driven by AI highlights the intersectional nature of the eight risks and their potential to affect each other.

Figure 2 shows the number of job vacancies (in thousands) in the United States from 2001 to 2025. Although vacancies appear to be plateauing since their spike following the COVID-19 pandemic, many employers express their continued inability to fill vacant positions, even with the emergence of AI.

Figure 2. Job Vacancies in the United States from 2001 to 2025



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics (2001–2025)

Geopolitical Uncertainty

Geopolitical risk generates a sense of uncertainty for individuals, leading to lower performance at work. Employers should continuously monitor the current environment and communicate the potential impacts of geopolitical events on the organization. At the individual and community level, health and well-being are shaped by geopolitical determinants. Factors such as geographic region, government, policies, or instability may create uncertainty that is felt both inside and outside of work. By cultivating psychological and physical security in the workplace, employers can create an environment that enables individuals to thrive inside and outside of work and remain resilient in the face of geopolitical risk.

Exclusion of People

Employers lose a competitive edge with a homogeneous talent pool. When organizations remove unique perspectives, skills, and knowledge, they forego drivers of novelty and economic growth. To build resiliency, employers should cultivate a varied talent pool that spans unique professional expertise, backgrounds, geographic regions, perspectives, identities, and generations in order to drive innovation and higher performance for all.

Mental Health

Mental health is a risk in its own right, but it is intrinsically connected to the other seven emerging and escalating risks. Both inside and outside of work, uncertainty disrupts performance and prevents employees from operating at their best. It can permeate the entire spectrum of the whole person (see Figure 3). A failure to equip internal and external communities with the tools to manage uncertainty and their mental health impacts the well-being and performance of the organization. Further, by prioritizing a sense of certainty and mental well-being for employees, employers can promote resilience for all.

Figure 3. Components of Whole-Person Health

Source: Milken Institute (2023), adapted from the University of Michigan Model of Wellness

Actions and Insights for Employers

Mitigating risk is not only a business imperative for organizations but also an opportunity for employers to demonstrate a deliberate investment in their employees, their priorities, and the resilience of the communities they serve. A future Milken Institute Employer Action Exchange publication will illustrate the significant economic cost of employers not investing in these areas.

Our foundational employer work and literature review informed the development of the following action steps for employers. The framework for these actions is also inspired by similar risk management models for decision-making in the workplace: Risk Analysis in Healthcare Organizations and Industrial Hygiene (IH) /Occupational and Environmental Health and Safety (OEHS) Frameworks.

1. **Assess:** Stay actively attuned to both your internal and external environment. Ensure that mechanisms are in place to listen, learn, and scan internal sentiments and external shifts. Engagement in this iterative, ongoing process helps you stay agile in an ever-changing environment.
2. **Anticipate:** Use insights from the internal and external environment to anticipate and prepare for what lies ahead. Identify gaps and predict where infrastructure can be bolstered before challenges emerge. Doing so ensures that your employees, community, and business stay resilient in times of uncertainty.
3. **Acknowledge:** Understand that these risks do not occur in silos; their effects on employees, community, and business compound one another. An effective strategy is one that holistically mitigates these risks to benefit all parties.
4. **Act:** Regardless of industry, size, or sector, every employer can help prepare for emerging risks. Although these risks may manifest differently across organizations, every employer can contribute their unique expertise and partnership to build a more resilient infrastructure for all.

The eight emerging and escalating risks pose unique threats to workforces' health, safety, and ability to thrive in times of uncertainty. By staying **aware, anticipating** challenges, **acknowledging** risks as interconnected, and **acting** with intention, organizations can build infrastructure that supports growth and opportunity, strengthens performance, and cultivates a healthier, more resilient future for all.

Navigating the Insights and Actions by Risk Area

Below are links to recent EAE publications on employer project work or a priority topic. The resource provided is intended as a starting point or path toward action. In most cases, the reader will find additional information and references at the end of each unique publication to further the depth of the topic and action. Check our website for the latest publications.

Physical Security

- Employers at the Intersection of Public Health and Public Safety
- Raising Awareness and Knowledge: Employer Investments in Public Health and Public Safety
- Employers Investing in Mitigating Risk to Build Resilient Workforces, Communities, and Businesses
- Operation Engage: Reach and Impact Report 2022

Artificial Intelligence

- Competitive Edge: Investing in Workforce Resiliency and Risk Mitigation
- The Future of Flourishing: AI, Deep Tech, and Cross-Sector Collaboration

Weather Events

- Forging a Climate-Resilient Workplace for Next-Generation Employees

Economic Uncertainty

- Employer Action Exchange: Listening to Executive Insights on Whole Person Health Investments
- Employer Action Exchange: Executive Reflections on Building Resilient Businesses Through Whole-Person Health Investments

Talent Shortage

- Culmination of Insights and Actions: Balanced and Customized Approaches to K–12 Prevention Education with Employer Engagement
- How the Workplace Can Support Caregivers of Youth with Mental Health Conditions
- Employers Investing in Leading with Empathy
- Milken Institute's Employer Action Exchange Elevates the Role of Employers Prioritizing Public Health Priorities
- Reimagining Workplace Resiliency Across Generations
- An Evolving Workplace for Next-Gen Employees

Geopolitical Uncertainty

- Employers Investing in Mitigating Risk to Build Resilient Workforces, Communities, and Businesses
- Culmination of Insights and Actions: Employers Building a Resilient Culture from HQ to Isolated Remote Locations
- Employers Taking a Holistic Review of Culture, Policy, and Multinational Regulations for Geographically Remote/Isolated Employees

Exclusion of People

- Milken Institute Public Health Advisory Board Collective Insight: The Role of Employers as Key Public Health Stakeholders
- An Evolving Workplace for Next-Gen Employees
- Racial Equity and Mental Health in the Workplace: Actions to Drive Systems Change
- Making Waves: Next Gen Making a Difference in Mental Health in the Workplace
- A Thriving Workplace: Belongingness as a Tenet of Workplace Mental Health

Mental Health

- Collaboration and Accountability Across Employers in Remote Settings
- Employers Investing in Leading with Empathy
- The Evolution of Employers' Role in Public Health
- An Evolving Workplace for Next-Gen Employees
- Understanding and Identifying Gaps in Employer Mental Health Resources

About the Milken Institute

The Milken Institute is a nonprofit, nonpartisan global think tank focused on accelerating measurable progress on the path to a meaningful life. With a focus on financial, physical, mental, and environmental health, we bring together the best ideas and innovative resourcing to develop blueprints for tackling some of our most critical global issues through the lens of what's pressing now and what's coming next.

About Milken Institute Health

Milken Institute Health develops research and programs to advance solutions in biomedical innovation, public health, healthy aging, and food systems.

About Public Health at the Milken Institute

Public Health at the Milken Institute develops research, programs, and initiatives to activate sustainable solutions leading to better health for individuals and communities worldwide. To catalyze policy, system, and environmental change in public health and sustain impact, we approach our work in four interconnected areas: Prevention and Chronic Disease, Mental Health, Health Equity, and Employers and Public Health Priorities, which includes the Employer Action Exchange.

About the Milken Institute Employer Action Exchange

The Employer Action Exchange provides a trusted platform and includes expert guidance from key opinion leaders, briefings, and networking to advance customized, tangible actions on whole-person health priorities and investments. It offers a cultivated experience for employers representing diverse sectors and industries.