



# The Evolving Role and Economic Impact of Employers in Communities

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## Introduction

Businesses of all sizes, industries, and sectors face unique risks that, when addressed through local collaborative approaches, can strengthen organizational, individual, and community resilience. The Milken Institute [Employer Action Exchange](#) (EAE) continues to explore employers' unique role in mitigating specific risks and building resiliency for employees, businesses, organizations, and communities. [A recent publication](#) from the EAE highlights eight emerging and escalating risks that employers should prepare for in today's dynamic environment. These eight risks—mental health, physical security, artificial intelligence, weather events, economic uncertainty, talent shortages, geopolitical instability, and the exclusion of people—affect all businesses regardless of their size, reach, or geographic location.

On June 3, 2025, the EAE hosted a private roundtable, *The Future of Health and the Evolving Role of Local to Large Employers in Community Well-Being*, to explore these issues. The event was attended by 18 leaders representing half a million employees in a variety of industries and sectors, including finance, technology, education, pharmaceuticals, local government, and health care. These organizations span 2,000 physical locations in more than 100 countries, with a collective market capitalization of \$3 trillion as of July 17, 2025 (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Collective Reach of Session Attendees**



Source: Milken Institute analysis (2025)

This group of executives engaged in a robust discussion following a presentation of EAE research, which included a literature review of more than 30 sources from 2005 to 2025, as well as previous foundational work. These academic findings, industry insights, and [first-hand interviews](#) offer a comprehensive view of the external landscape, helping to frame key issues and capturing evolving priorities for employers across industries and sectors. This EAE research served as a launching point for a productive session focused on how all employers—regardless of size—can leverage their unique strengths and partnerships to build sustainable relationships and drive policy into action by listening to and anticipating the needs of both their internal and external communities. By doing so, employers can create thriving businesses, flourishing people, and healthier, more resilient communities.



# The Economic and Social Impact of Businesses in Communities

Employers, regardless of their size, play a critical role in shaping not only their internal workplace community but also the external localities in which they operate. Because employees' health is often tied to the safety and well-being of the places where they live and work, investing in healthy communities is not just the right thing to do—it makes business sense. Industry networks and partnerships with community-based organizations (CBOs) and local nonprofits can create a strong employer ecosystem that facilitates sharing of insights across all-sized employers and help employers better understand the needs of their employees, customers, and local communities.

Small businesses are the heart of local communities and play a role not only in shaping local well-being but also in driving the global economy. Small and medium enterprises—businesses that employ fewer than 500 people—are responsible for 70 percent of employment around the world and 70 percent of the global GDP. They are also catalysts for future innovation and impact, creating 16 times more US patents and more than half of new jobs in the US.

Beyond their economic impact, small businesses are deeply woven into the social fabric of communities, making them essential to understanding local identity and regional influences—all of which are critical precursors for building resilience.

Every business was once a small business. Yet, small business partnerships are approached in a way that potentially limits their ability to serve as long-term, strategic community partners. Larger employers, even those with global reach, ultimately have a local footprint wherever they operate. Participating in hyperlocal networks such as chambers of commerce can open lines of communication and help businesses to understand the issues impacting the well-being of their surrounding communities. This can also lead to partnerships with smaller businesses that cocreate and implement solutions both with and for the local community.

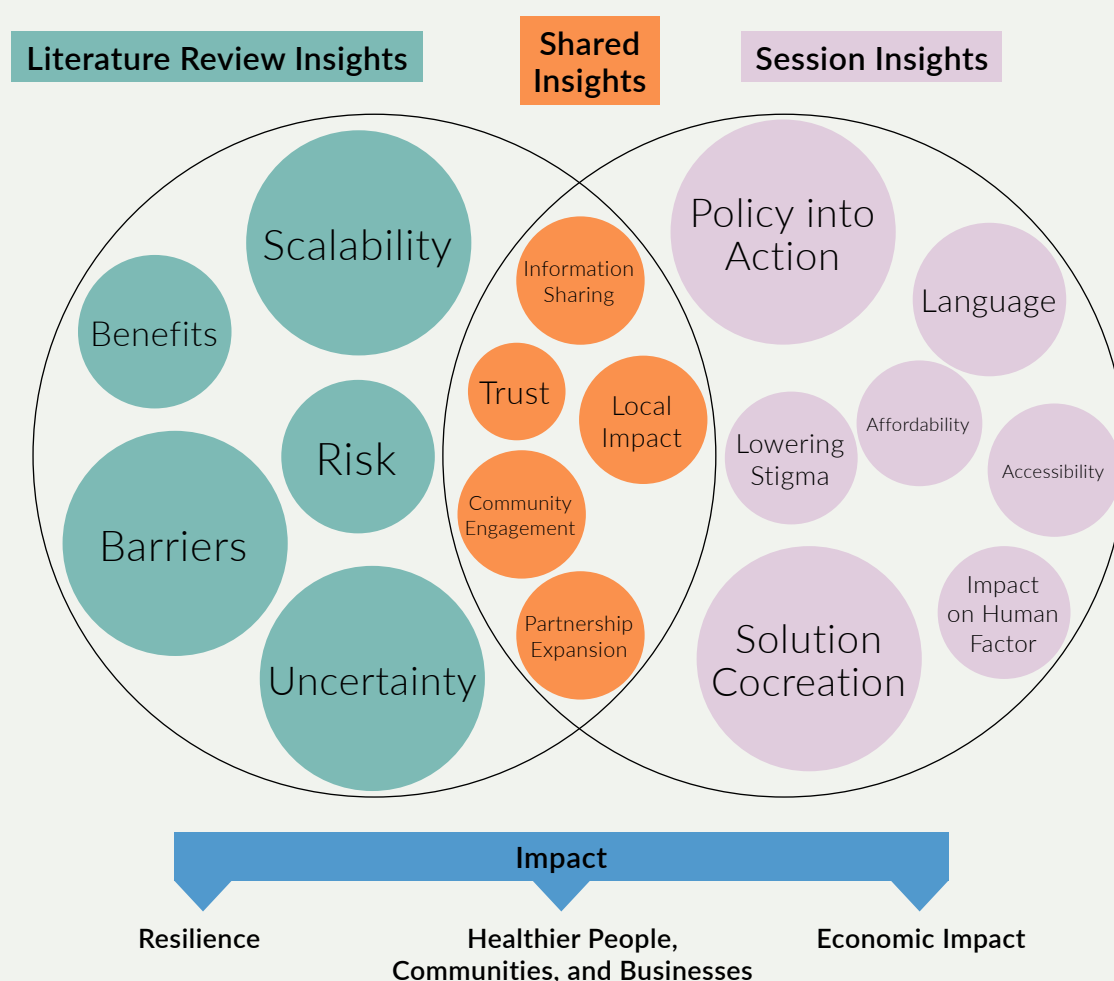
To fully involve small businesses in these public-private partnerships, collaborations must include government entities, CBOs, and employers of all sizes. Collaboration also goes beyond traditional partnerships such as corporate accelerator, grant and education, and supplier diversity programs to cocreate meaningful roles as employer partners in the community. Integrating small businesses as long-term partners in community goals related to health and elevating local voices is not just a community investment—it is a smart business decision. As previous publications from EAE research and Milken Institute Finance show, the real risk is not investing in a comprehensive manner that accounts for the larger community ecosystem, which includes employers of all sizes.

Investing at the local level, whether through collaboration or financial investment, also means understanding the needs of the larger community, creating meaningful intersections, collaborating with local employers, which involves aligning on resources, and identifying potential challenges.

# Key Research Themes and Priorities

Several key themes emerged from both the review of existing literature and the roundtable discussion (see Figure 2). Distinct themes from the literature review included scalability, benefits, barriers, risk, and uncertainty. Themes from the roundtable included translating policy into action, language, access, affordability, stigma, and broader impacts on the human experience. Overlapping themes included information sharing, local impact, trust, community engagement, and partnership expansion.

**Figure 2: Comparison of Insights from Pre-Roundtable Literature Review, Key Themes Identified During the Session, and the Subsequent Impact of Applying These Insights**



Source: Milken Institute analysis (2025)

Together, three areas of subsequent impact repeatedly emerged throughout the literature review and session insights: resilience; healthier people, communities, and businesses; and economic impact.

# Three Actionable Insights and Examples for Employers

## 1 Building Community Engagement Through Collective Action

By partnering with other employers of all sizes and industries, organizations can improve the health and performance of individuals, their businesses, and the external communities.

**“The vital element is partnership. Collaboration across disciplines and sectors is not just good practice—it is essential. The health challenges we face are too large and complex for any person or organization to impact alone.”**

—**Esther Krofah**, Executive Vice President, Milken Institute Health, in [“Where There Is a Collective Will, There Is a Way Toward Better Health for All”](#)

### Action

Scan your environment to find employers with overlapping interests regardless of industry, sector, or size.

### Example

The NYC Health Department’s population health agenda, HealthyNYC, is the city’s vision for improving life expectancy and creating a healthier New York City for all. This endeavor engages communities through partnerships, policy, and strategic planning aligned with goals and a clear measure of success: longevity. A diverse group of external stakeholders (HealthyNYC Champions) has joined the effort to raise the average life expectancy of New Yorkers by 2030. This cross-sector initiative was formally codified into local law in 2024.

[HealthyNYC: New York City’s Campaign for Healthier, Longer Lives](#)

### Context for Insights and Actions

The workplace itself is a community, and employers have a responsibility to customize policies and programs to anticipate the needs of their employees. Designing solutions, programs, and policies alongside employees builds trust and is a way to reinvest in the health and performance of their workforce, the surrounding community, and the business.



Meeting people where they are, providing the resources they identify as necessary, and making those resources accessible is increasingly important, especially considering the multigenerational workforce and rising levels of uncertainty across work and life. Throughout the discussion, attendees cited affordability—across health, housing, and basic living expenses—as a priority for employers to better understand and as a barrier to address. Employers can also improve employee health by leveraging data from local entities on key components of whole-person health. Attendees cited examples such as food deserts, financial and social disparities, and barriers to commuting. Consulting with employees—who are often trusted voices and key players at the local level—to identify points of stress and sharing data across employers can help anticipate problems before they emerge and develop thriving people, communities, and businesses.

## 2 Employers Sharing Information with Community-Based Organizations

Identify intersecting priorities where conversations, collaboration, and networks can be built. Bridge partnerships to incorporate and amplify local voices. Deepen trust and transparency at the local level.

**“Companies must engage with the communities they serve. Whether through patient advocacy or partnerships with local organizations, biotech companies have a role in ensuring that scientific advancements translate into real-world benefits. By investing in both internal and external stakeholders, we create a more stable and resilient ecosystem for everyone involved.”**

—Dipal Doshi, CEO, Entrada Therapeutics, in [“Navigating the Journey: The Need for a Multipronged Approach to Reach Long-Term Goals”](#)

### Action

Identify issues that matter to the local community, leverage existing infrastructures, and work with local partners that have a shared vision and plan.

## Example

EVERFI, a digital K-12 education platform, actively engages local stakeholders to understand community needs to customize content and education. Teachers, schools, and districts are consulted regularly to identify priorities and inform tailored solutions.

Culmination of Insights and Actions: Curriculum vs. Culture for Representation and Employer Investments in Prevention for K-12

## Context for Insights and Actions

Employers have a vested interest in the health and safety of the communities in which they operate, as community well-being directly impacts their workforce, customers, and ultimately, business performance. As a result, many employers are building longer-term partnerships with CBOs to better understand local needs and, in turn, support community and organizational resilience.

Collaboration looks different for every business, but it always includes deep listening and community involvement—often through CBOs—to address local needs. Local communities should be empowered to implement approaches and infrastructure in a manner that is relevant to them, including through the use of accessible language, cultural considerations, barriers, and points of continuity. Solutions should be centered around the ways that resources can be implemented by those utilizing them. Giving CBOs a seat at the table when shaping community-focused solutions creates a sense of trust, agency, shared responsibility, and ultimately, sustained impact.

## 3 Employers Expanding Partnerships Within Their Shared Community

Find common ground where unique strengths can be leveraged and identify shared goals. Set a common framework for success. Integrate and share data-driven insights. Build reasonable milestones and timelines.

**“Workplace resilience is about adapting, innovating, and supporting each other in the face of challenges. [...] At the community level, resilience is about adaptability and collective strength, ensuring we grow stronger together.”**

—Eric Cioè-Peña, MD, Vice President, Global Health, Northwell Health, in “Collaboration as a Means to Build Resilience in our Global Workforce”



## Action

Engage in conversations and collaboration that identify pain points and share insights.

## Example

The Milken Institute EAE Executive Insights Series highlights leaders who are taking action to mitigate risk, build resilience, and prioritize health. Since 2023, leaders from 11 industries, representing 440,000 employees across 87 countries, have participated, sharing insights to advance health and performance for all.

[Employer Action Exchange: Executive Reflections on Building Resilient Businesses Through Whole-Person Health Investments](#)

## Context for Insights and Actions

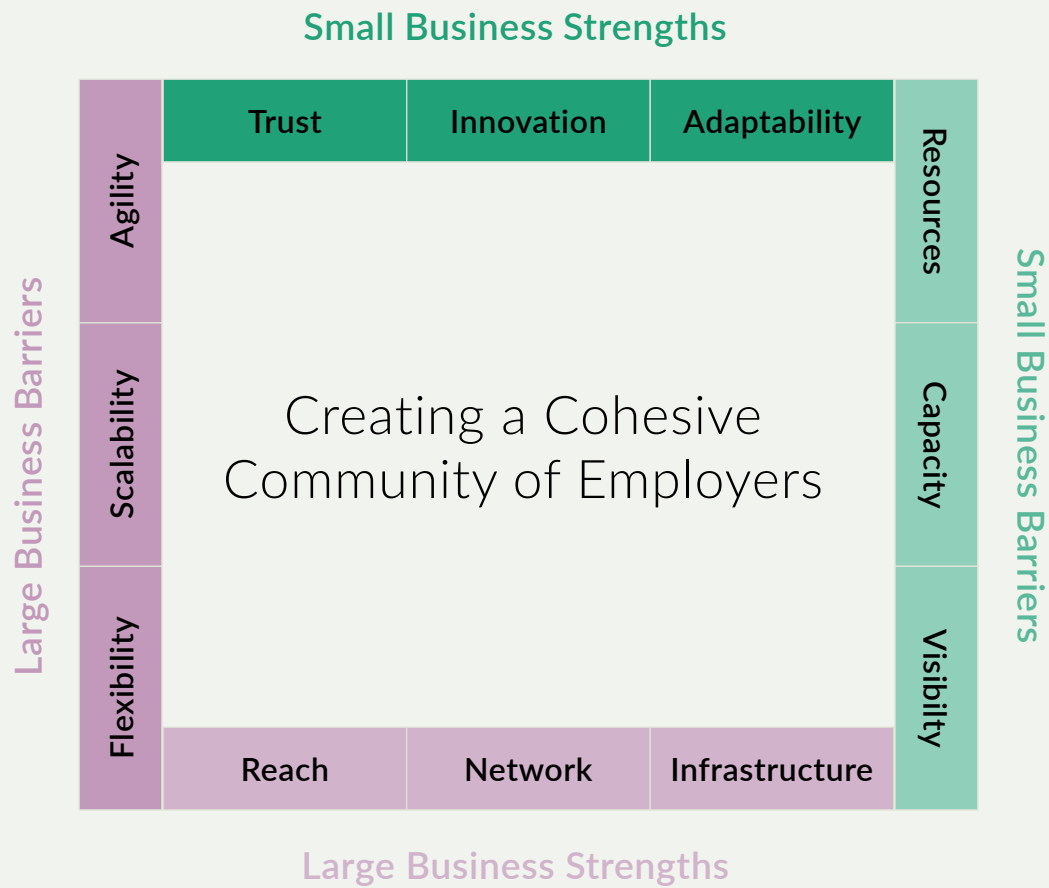
Partnerships are integral to driving meaningful and sustainable change, regardless of size, sector, or industry. By tapping into the [employer's role as a key public health partner](#) and collaborating with untraditional partners, insights can be shared, elevated, and eventually scaled. Sharing best practices, challenges, and success stories allows organizations to better understand and utilize their strengths.

Whether it be trust, access to resources, infrastructure, or flexibility, all organizations can play a role in driving change and raising the bar across the broader employer ecosystem. True collaboration also means aligning on how success is measured and defining together what “good health” means across industries and sectors. The absence of common language, benchmarks, and standards for “good health” leads to further fragmentation across employers, individuals, and communities. Leveraging and, most importantly, sharing data-driven insights across organizations can help close the gap to drive performance and improve whole-person health for all.

Leveraging the unique strengths and addressing the barriers of both small and large businesses can create a cohesive employer community that uplifts the workforce, drives local impact, and enhances business performance (see Figure 3). By bridging gaps across employers, businesses can learn from one another, share insights, and build an ecosystem that supports mutual growth and sustained success.



Figure 3: Leveraging Strengths to Create a Cohesive Community of Employers



Note: Each business size brings its own strengths and barriers.

Source: Milken Institute analysis (2025)

Across all the insights shared in the session, one notion continued to ring true: the common thread that unites individuals, communities, and organizations is people. The human factor permeates every business, regardless of size, sector, or industry. Placing people at the center of decisions, partnerships, and solutions fosters systems and cultures where individuals, communities, and organizations can thrive. Economic impact, human performance, and improved health are driven by identifying gaps, goal setting, measuring progress, and leveraging organizations’ unique strengths. In the end, organizations don’t succeed in solitude—they succeed by rising together.



# About Us

## 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.

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