# Work Slop: What SHRM's Research Says About AI Guardrails and the Skills Gap

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Host: Dr. Shari Simpson, Thought Leader, Paylocity

Guest: Dr. James Atkinson, VP of Thought Leadership, SHRM

[00:00:00] **ANNOUNCER:** You're listening to The HR Mixtape, a podcast for leaders who want to understand people, strengthen culture, and navigate change with clarity. Today's conversation starts now.

[00:00:15] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** Joining me today is James Atkinson, Vice President of Thought Leadership at the Society for Human Resource Management. He is a product and data leader with more than 15 years of experience, including nearly six years at Gartner, where he led a $270 million suite of data products built specifically for HR executives. James, thank you so much for sitting down with me.

[00:00:42] **DR. JAMES ATKINSON:** Yes, absolutely. Thanks for having me.

[00:00:44] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** So you have an amazing title. You're in thought leadership just like I'm in thought leadership, so I get so excited to talk to you about what's happening in the SHRM space. So as we think about SHRM's latest research, I'm curious, what is it telling us about where the labor market is headed in the next 12 to 18 months?

[00:01:01] **DR. JAMES ATKINSON:** Yeah, absolutely. I think what we've seen with the labor market over the last year or so is a bit predictive of where we're going these next 12 to 18 months. It's a bit of an uneven and slightly unpredictable labor market. We certainly saw a lot of labor market cooling for the last year or so, but then in the last two to three months, it's been heating up a bit too. And so I think it's good for us to not over-index on the last couple of months, but look at the more holistic picture of where we are as well. So I think we're going to see that kind of unevenness continue. And when I talk about unevenness, I mean that it depends on what part of the labor market you're in as to whether or not it's a hot or cold market, right? So there are certain areas, healthcare being one of them, that just continue to have lots of new jobs out there. It's a booming place, and it's a place that's not going to stop, given our aging population here. We're going to continue to see a lot of growth in the healthcare sector. But then there's a number of other sectors where we've seen either stabilizing or declining growth as well. Obviously, the government sector, primarily driven by the federal workforce. We've seen a bit of that decline over the last year. But on the local government side, we actually have seen a boost in the last few months too. So again, it's that unevenness of what we're expecting across those next 12 to 18 months.

[00:02:38] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** Well, yeah, and it's amazing to see what some of these big tech companies are doing alongside all of the advancements in AI, right? So we're laying off in the tech sector, but we're trying to advance AI. So it's interesting. You'll see probably an increase in construction roles as we build these data centers out. So you're right. It kind of just depends upon where you're at. For the HR leader that is trying to make that ROI case for people investment right now, a lot of them have to get in front of maybe a skeptical CFO. What's their argument that they should be going in with, or what are the data points they should be bringing for those conversations?

[00:03:13] **DR. JAMES ATKINSON:** Well, first and foremost, it's very much about framing it as a business problem or a business opportunity, not framing it necessarily in HR terms, right? So thinking about what's the value that we're talking about when we think about this particular investment. What is the increase in productivity we're going to see? What is the reduction in cost that we expect to see? So really framing any new investments, especially in our people, into what's the value that that's going to bring to the organization. That's always the case, but I think especially right now when we see things like economic uncertainty being at the top of the list in terms of some of the challenges that CEOs are grappling with. You have to be more laser-focused on exactly why this is a good investment.

[00:04:08] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** Yeah, it makes so much sense, and I think sometimes we miss that, and you hit the nail on the head, that don't go in with HR speak. And I love and hate that term all at the same time because I know what you're getting at, right? We try to go in with the warm and fuzzies. We want to paint this beautiful picture of what we can accomplish, but if we do it wrong, if we're not going in by saying, "Hey, one of our product offerings this year requires this skill set. We don't have it in our organization. Here's what it's going to cost to buy it. Here's what it's going to cost to build it from inside. Here's my recommendation that's going to increase profitability and decrease" whatever the things are. We've got to do that. We've got to start having conversations that way.

[00:04:49] **DR. JAMES ATKINSON:** And I think, just going back to our research, we just released some research on navigating the C-suite, and in that research itself, it said that CFOs in particular, they want to know exactly what the investment opportunity is, the ROI, and they want it to all be backed by workforce data, and that was something that was very specific to the CFO. They want to see that data that says this is a good investment, and I think that's very important.

[00:05:18] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** Yeah. That's an interesting data point that I hadn't heard yet, that CFOs want that. So obviously SHRM's research, those listening should definitely tap into that. What are other maybe data points that you've seen CFOs want that maybe HR isn't aware they should be looking at?

[00:05:34] **DR. JAMES ATKINSON:** Well, I think that the CFO cares about what's the impact on turnover, right? So a person not in the role means a day of lost productivity, so you can always bring in turnover metrics. You can bring in any kind of performance metrics related to that particular role that you might be arguing as well. I think there's a range of different KPIs that are important to the CFO. I think the importance is figure out what they care about and make sure that you're crafting your message tailored directly to them.

[00:06:11] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** Oh, I love that. I give that advice a lot to people who are younger in their careers. Start by just understanding how your C-suite wants to be presented to. Some want story first, data second. Some want data first. Some want it in advance. Some want to brainstorm with you. That's such a good easy way, like just, "How do you like to be communicated with?" And it kind of makes some of that intimidation go away too because you know you're showing up the way that they like.

[00:06:39] **DR. JAMES ATKINSON:** Exactly. Yeah.

[00:06:40] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** All right. So what workforce trend have you seen continue to show up in SHRM's research right now that organizations maybe haven't caught onto yet?

[00:06:48] **DR. JAMES ATKINSON:** Well, I of course am going to talk about AI. AI is on everyone's mind, and we actually just released some new research that talks about the prevalence of workers using AI. So about a little less than half are using it pretty regularly in their jobs, but the trend that I want to make sure people are aware of is that, of those that are leveraging it, about 44% say that they admit to producing work slop with their AI. So work slop being that term of that AI-generated content that looks good on the surface but lacks a bit of that substance underneath. I think it's important for HR leaders, and not just HR leaders, but broader managers and people across, to understand that AI has tremendous potential and opportunity, but it needs guidance. It needs guardrails, and I think as HR, we can lean into that by empowering our managers, empowering those around us to say, "This is what good looks like." I think that's a real opportunity that maybe not everyone's thinking about as you're excited about the AI train moving.

[00:08:01] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** Yeah. I recently wrote an article about a term that I saw called phoductivity.

[00:08:07] **DR. JAMES ATKINSON:** Exactly.

[00:08:07] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** Right? Like this idea that you're being so much more productive, which in a lot of ways you can be. If you're using the tools right, you can definitely be more productive, but the part that I think is missing is HR hasn't stepped in to say, "Hey, now that you have this extra time, how are we helping you move into more strategy? How are we helping you tackle bigger projects because now you have access to these tools?" And I suspect there's a little bit of a fear there. People who are overwhelmed in their jobs, and they've figured out how to make their lives easier, they don't necessarily want to give that back to the organization. But it's that open conversation, right? Like, "Hey, maybe there is something really fun you can work on if we knew you had the time, and we haven't given it to you yet because we're not making that connection." So what's one insight that's coming out of SHRM's research right now that every HR person should be acting on? Something that maybe doesn't keep you up at night but you're like, hey, we've got to get ahead of this, and we can own the narrative in our organizations if we are tackling this.

[00:09:12] **DR. JAMES ATKINSON:** You know, we're going to be covering some new research actually later today, and it's called The Skills Revolution. The research will be coming out in the next couple of weeks. And the insight at the high level is about looking at how quick skills are changing, recognizing that our learning and development systems aren't typically equipped to keep up with that rapid pace of change. And so the thing that I want people to take away is just keep an eye on that, because if your employees are not getting what they need in order to develop in their role and develop for their future, they will be looking elsewhere. We do know that career development opportunities is one of the biggest drivers of attrition. If people don't get that when and where they need it for their current jobs, they're going to look somewhere else. So it's something I want HR to be thinking about. I'm excited about this research. We're showing ways in which you can get ahead of it and get ahead of the game as well. But just recognizing that that's an important lever that we've got to pay a lot of attention to, because right now, in most organizations, the skills are just moving too quick, and we're not keeping pace.

[00:10:33] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** Yeah. And Gen Z especially is looking for this in organizations. I've talked about this before in the podcast, but they really push when they come in, and I'm actually fully behind it, but they push for, "What's my path to advancement? What's my path to an excellent performance rating? How can I be promoted?" Sometimes it comes a little too soon in the career, but it's a good question. Do you think, based on what you're seeing out of that research, that we're actually going to get to a place now where we're doing true skills inventories instead of job descriptions? Because that's kind of been in the ether for a while now, is like we're moving towards skills, we're moving away from job descriptions. I haven't seen a ton of organizations embrace it yet though.

[00:11:18] **DR. JAMES ATKINSON:** It's really hard. And that's why. It's really hard to keep up with it. It's hard to know how things are changing as quickly as they are. The exciting thing is that we're going to go back to talking about AI, talking about technology. We're moving in a way that we can learn more and more quickly about what is needed in terms of the skills within our organization and across the industry. And I think tapping into those technological advancements will help us get there quicker. But it's been a problem we've tried to solve for many years. It's a problem that will remain, but I think there are some opportunities ahead to get ahead of things when it comes to skills.

[00:12:05] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** That's awesome. I'm so excited to see what we can do in this space, and looking forward to the research. So depending upon when this episode goes live, we'll make sure that we either include that in the show notes or we give a link back out to SHRM so you can find that research. James, this was a wonderful conversation, a little bit of a tidbit on research at SHRM and everything that's coming down for the HR teams now. So thanks for sitting with me.

[00:12:27] **DR. JAMES ATKINSON:** Yes. Thanks so much for having me today.

[00:12:36] **ANNOUNCER:** Thanks for tuning in to The HR Mixtape. Like, share, review, and subscribe to support the show and help more people discover these conversations. Until next time, keep the conversation going.