



# THIS WEEK'S PROGRAM

September 16, 2025

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## *Dr. Cheryl Richards* *CEO, Catapult Employers Association*

by **Susie Masotti**

Charlotte Rotary Club was pleased to have Cheryl Richards, CEO of Catapult Employers Association, serve as the guest speaker at the September 16<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Charlotte Rotary Club.

**Dr. Tony Zeiss** introduced Cheryl. He noted that Cheryl has spent more than 30 years in higher education, including when he hired her as Dean of the Cato Campus of Central Piedmont Community College. She also served at Johnson and Wales University (President) and as Founding CEO & Regional Dean of Northeastern University, Charlotte. She brought extensive experience in workforce development as well as community engagement in providing upward mobility for literally thousands of people.

Cheryl began her remarks by acknowledging Dr. Zeiss for hiring her at CPCC, and he was a role model of the type of leader she wanted to be. Catapult was founded in the interest of creating an employer's association that provides resources to serve them. Catapult begins their process by finding out their plan so that they can better understand their needs and goals. Catapult provides member services that include 24/7 HR Advice, employment law, online HR tools as well as conferences that include events and peer networking. They also provide pre-employment screening, compensation consulting, learning and development for their employees, as well as strategic HR solutions providing them with outsourced and fractional HR services.

One of the key services provided is employee surveys, as well as surveys Catapult conducts from their own clients. The surveys aim to identify individual challenges. The results in 2024 showed challenges that were similar to those of

the past 10 years – providing competitive wages, nurturing future leaders, talent acquisition and retention, as well as cybersecurity.

The data collected so far in 2025 shows a pretty dramatic change in what employees and employers are looking for, and more importantly, what they are concerned about. Those concerns include:

- Inflation puts everyone in a different place financially.
- DOGE – which was intended to find efficiencies in federal entities but became an arm that we've seen conduct drastic workforce cuts, which are now impacting the corporate world
- A push back on DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) – in the last 9 months, initiatives designed to level the playing field have been attacked, putting people at odds with the employers they work for.
- Tariffs – this issue has completely changed how our country is seen and how products are brought in, and that affects paying salaries
- Employer Expectations vs. Employee Needs – there is a true tug of war on workforce expectations – think of the “Coldplay” couple (a couple that were caught on an arena screen cuddling). As it turned out, it was the CEO and the head of HR who worked for him who were both married to other people at the time, and both later stepped down from their positions. The expectation from employees is that these individuals (and those in similar positions at their companies) should, at a minimum, be held to the same standard of behavior, if not higher, than the employees at the company.
- Corporations started telling people not to comment on the Charlie Kirk assassination. The government has fired people from the Coast Guard, Navy, and Department of Education for what they state were inappropriate comments. In the education sector, tenured employees were always considered untouchable, but in this climate, they are no longer protected. Here in Charlotte, our own Carolina Panthers fired an employee for posting about the event.

So, where does this leave us? It leaves chaos, confusion, and anger. Employers are starting to think they can't manage their business just with their employees, so they turn to AI which does not help with employee's confidence in their employer. It's never ending!

The #1 education practices in 2024 and 2025 are in plumbers and electricians which is work that can NOT be done or replaced by AI! What does that mean? The economic and social shifts in real work for policy changes. Unemployment and underemployment are higher for college graduates than it has ever been. The conversion of cost inflation and wage inflation post-COVID is 5-6% inflation. That is coming down (3.2% currently). Many employers are shifting from having employees to being 1099 companies, and this real acceleration comes with AI.

Top 10 trends for holding in 2025 are:

1. Automation on the rise
2. Optional Office
3. Skills over degree
4. Well-being of employees
5. Data-driven decisions
6. Building inclusivity

7. HR as a strategic driver
8. Employees experience matters
9. Upskilling the workforce
10. AI tech transformation

Then we turned to why has 2025 become such a turning point – operating costs are up and there have been supply chain shifts, local sourcing is becoming a trend, evaluation cost of turn-over is factoring into decisions about how employers move forward, the impact of DEI and immigration – in NC we are already seeing change in the food chain and we're sourcing from other parts of the country. Additionally, we cannot underestimate the importance of data to drive business decisions – doing things on the fly just isn't going to get you where you want to go.

We have the smallest and youngest workforce in our history, and at the same time, we're looking at retirement and succession plans for long-time leaders, turnover trends, how much PTO is enough, and how work-from-home or a hybrid plan works. The importance of employee engagement in the running of a business has never been more important – the cost of an unengaged employee costs the US \$1.9 trillion. 15% of employees are engaged, and the other 85% are costing us too much. Strategies need to be put in place- reorganizing, growth plans need to make sense, succession plans in place, so the workforce feels secure. Employees still expect competitive pay, work-life balance, and flexibility in work outs, but also want to receive competitive benefits.

Businesses need to embrace flexible work models and work toward finding a sweet spot that works to provide clear policies and flexible leadership that listens.

Technology is accelerating – we are in history 4.0 – technology is the norm, and AI is informing our employees.

So, how to make it work in 2025

- Be adaptable
- Elevate the skills of your current workforce
- Listen to your employees
- Adapt to AI in the workforce plan
- Align compensation with company plans
- Embrace continuous learning
- Plan for leadership continuity
- Continuing to innovate

After a wonderful presentation, Cheryl took questions from the Rotary attendees:

A member who represents Goodwill asked about pushing equitable access, and using the word "equity" puts us at risk of losing funding. They have already lost one federal grant. Cheryl answered that they are seeing this across the board with non-profits struggling with how to help people when there are now more than 500 "banned" words that could red flag a grant request – it is very challenging, and there is no true way right now to change that situation.

Another member asked about workplace flexibility – is there any data suggesting that moving to a 32-hour work week is attractive in attracting and retaining employees? Cheryl's response was that early in COVID, she wondered if this might be the catalyst to change the 40-hour work week that our country has been built on for decades, but it simply didn't. You can change to suit your organization (such as offering people a 6-3 schedule rather than 9-5, etc.). Offering shorter work hours but with benefits might be what your organization needs to look at.

One self-professed “old dog” listened to the changes, and they do not affect him because he retired three years ago. He asked, “Is there going to be a shift back to employer-led companies rather than catering to employees?” Cheryl replied that we have let the genie out of the bottle and that the pendulum swinging back for critical thinking is something that AI really can't provide; real people are needed, and their demands have changed – this change is real and not likely to go back to how it used to be.

Here is the recording:

With slides: <https://vimeo.com/1119237527?fl=pl&fe=sh>

Without slides: <https://vimeo.com/1119245709?fl=pl&fe=sh>

Your introduction begins at about 27 mins and 35 secs.