

2026 HR Conference
Tech Enabled. People Centered.

Welcome!

Dr. Cheryl Richards

President & CEO | Catapult



Winning the War for Talent: Two Fronts, One Fight



Dr. Cheryl Richards,
President & CEO,
Catapult



Gary Salamido,
President & CEO,
NC Chamber



Brian Denisar,
CEO,
Bobbit Construction, Inc.

A large portrait of Dr. Laura Ullrich, a woman with long brown hair, smiling. She is wearing a dark top. The background is a gradient from orange to pink.

Dr. Laura Ullrich

Director of Economic Research | Indeed

Labor Market Update

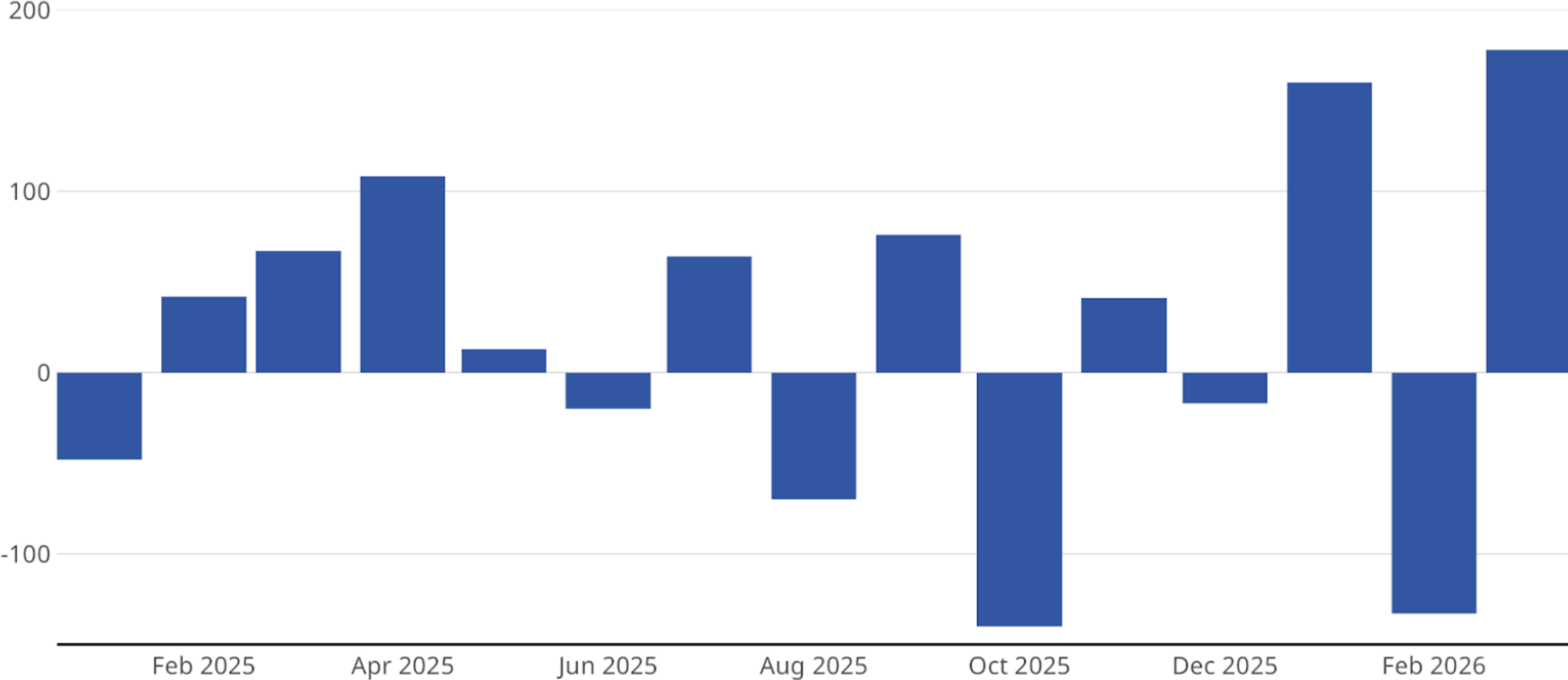
Indeed Hiring Lab – May 2026

Dr. Laura Dawson Ullrich
Director of Economic Research



US payroll growth has stalled, with gains in one month wiped out by losses in the next

Monthly change in nonfarm employment (thousands), Jan 2025-Mar 2026

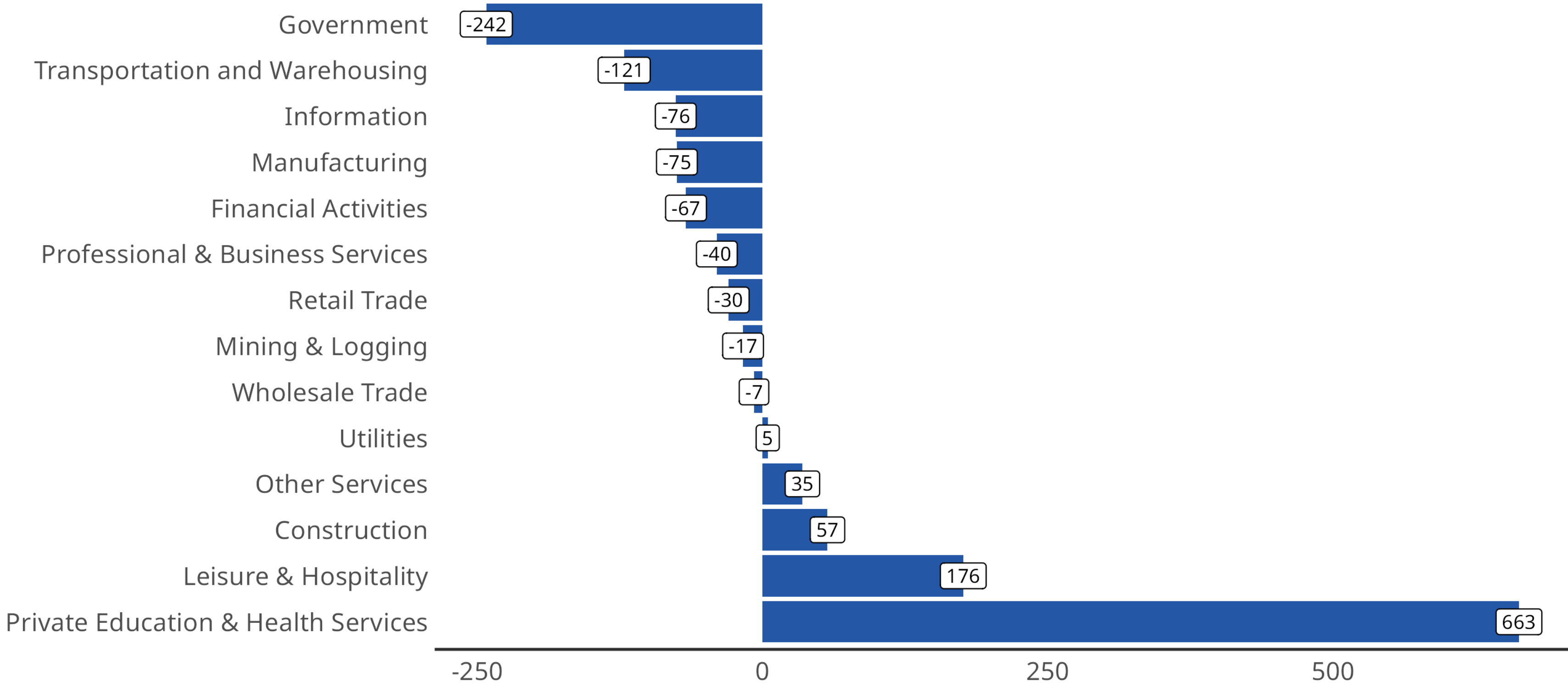


Source: US Bureau of Labor Statistics



Private education and health services have led job growth over the past year

Year-over-year change in payroll employment, as of Mar 2026 (thousand of jobs)

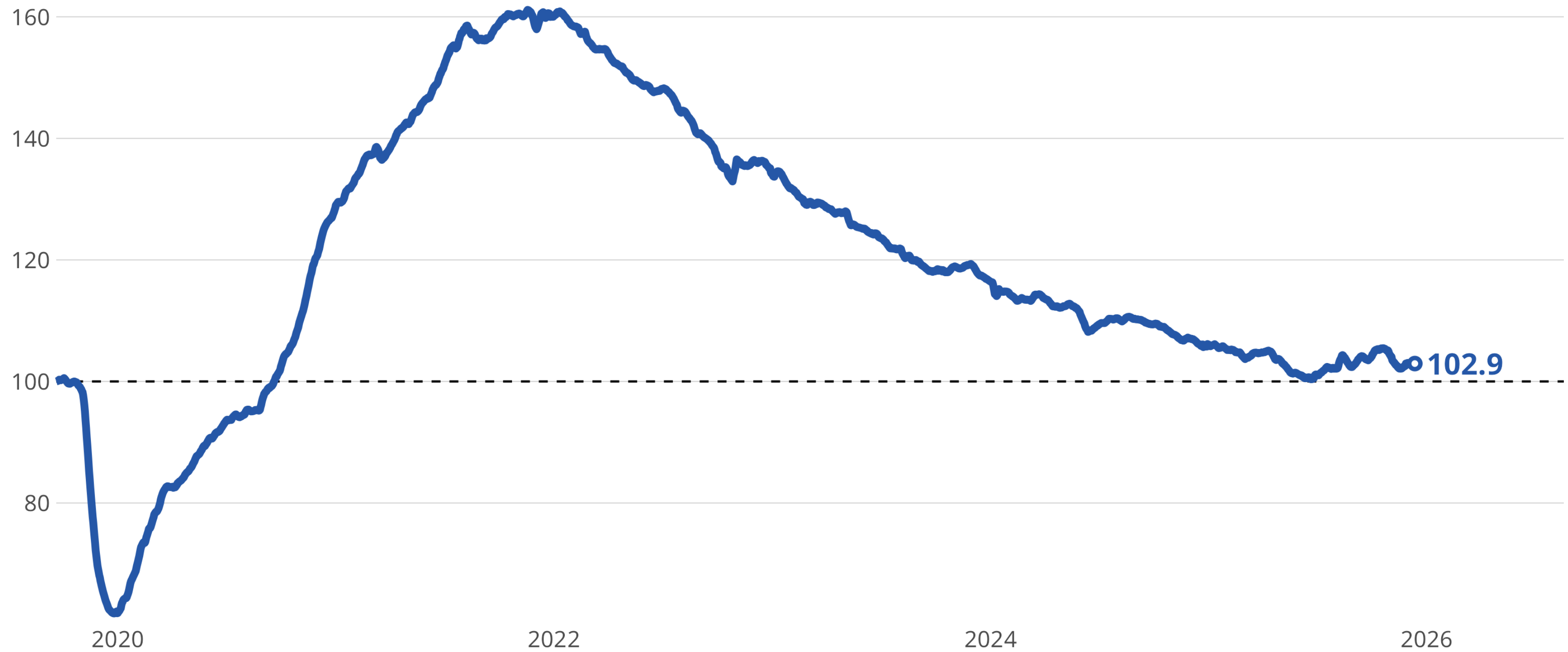


Source: US Bureau of Labor Statistics



Job postings return close to pre-pandemic levels

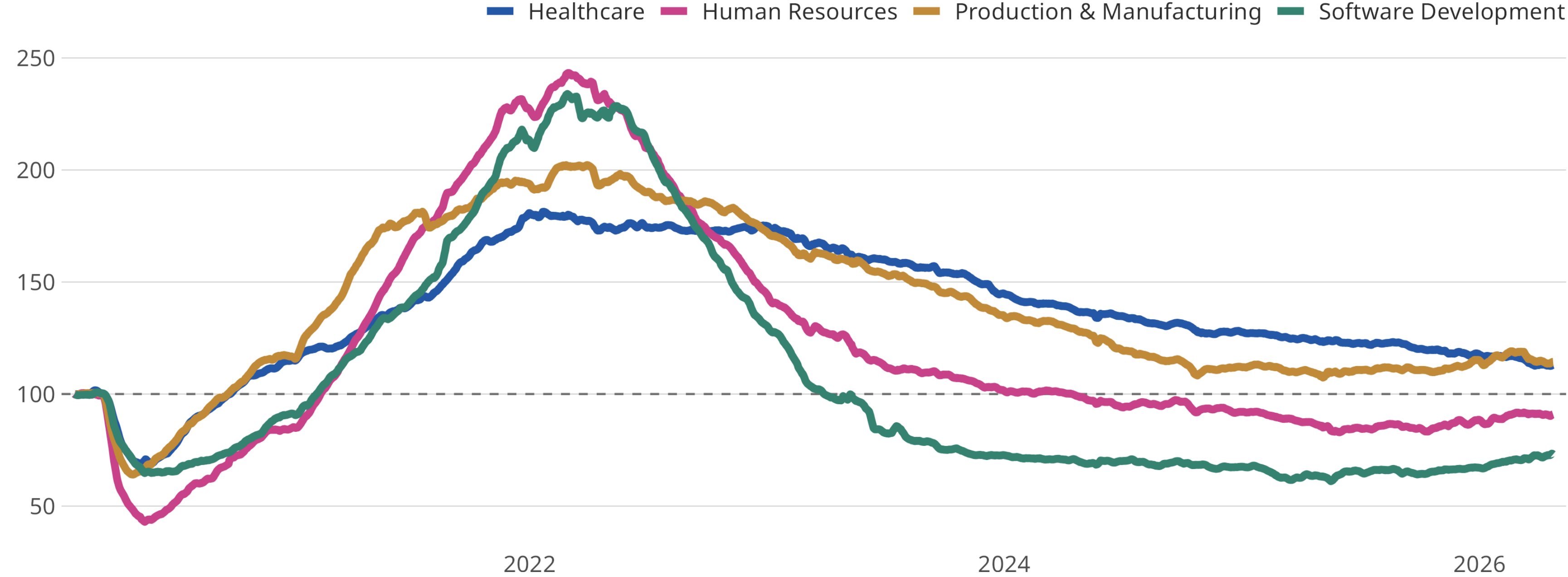
Indexed level of job postings (100= February 1, 2020), through April 24, 2026



Source: Indeed

Healthcare and Production & Manufacturing job postings remain elevated

Indexed change in job postings by selected sector (100=February 1, 2020) through April 24, 2026

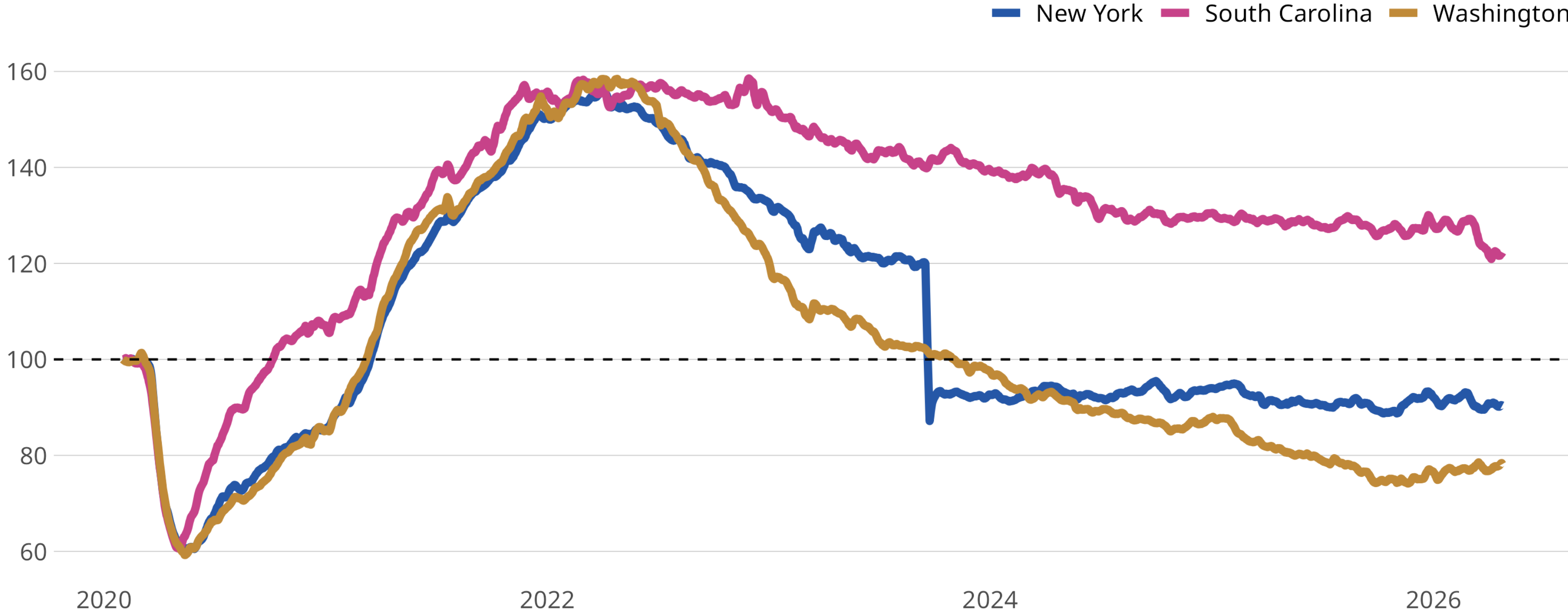


Source: Indeed



South Carolina outpaces Washington and New York in level of job postings compared to pre-pandemic levels

7-day trailing average of indexed level of job-postings, 100=February 1, 2025 (through April 24, 2026)

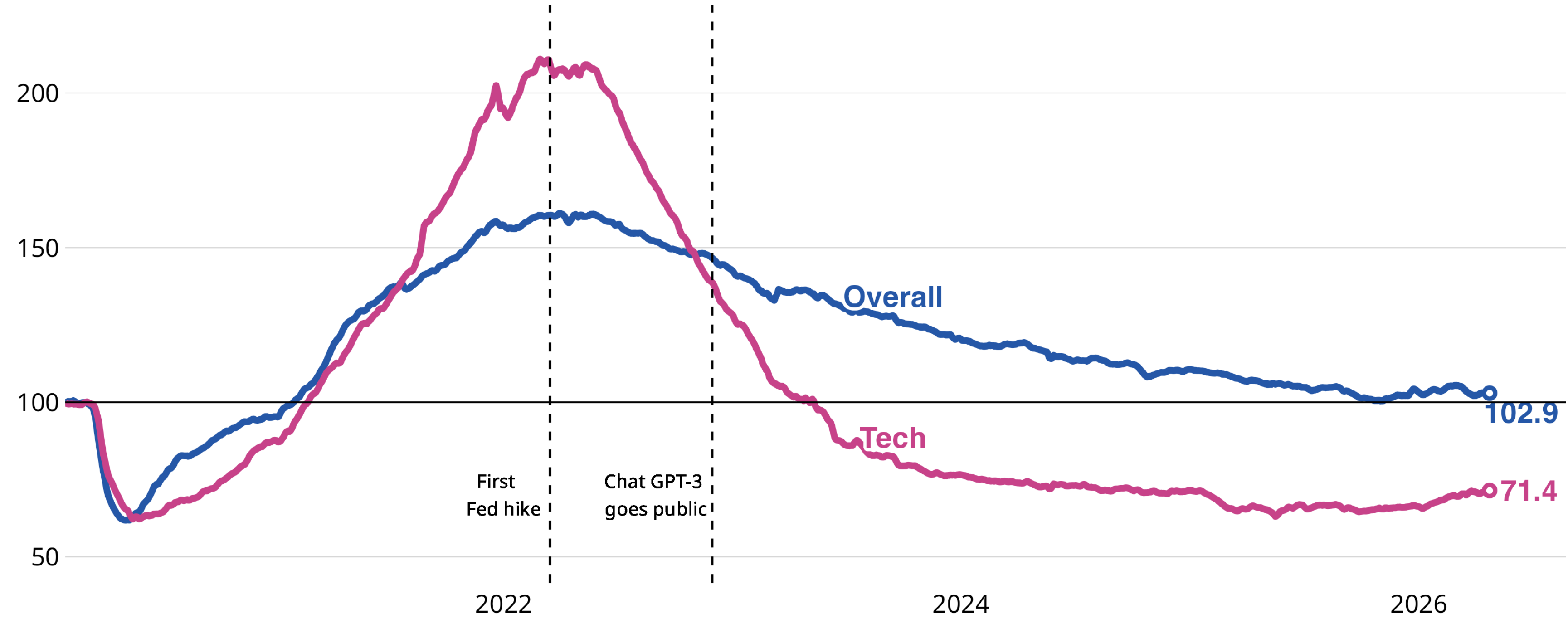


Source: Indeed



US tech job postings have gone from boom to bust

7-day trailing average of indexed job postings levels (Feb-2020 = 100), through April 24, 2026

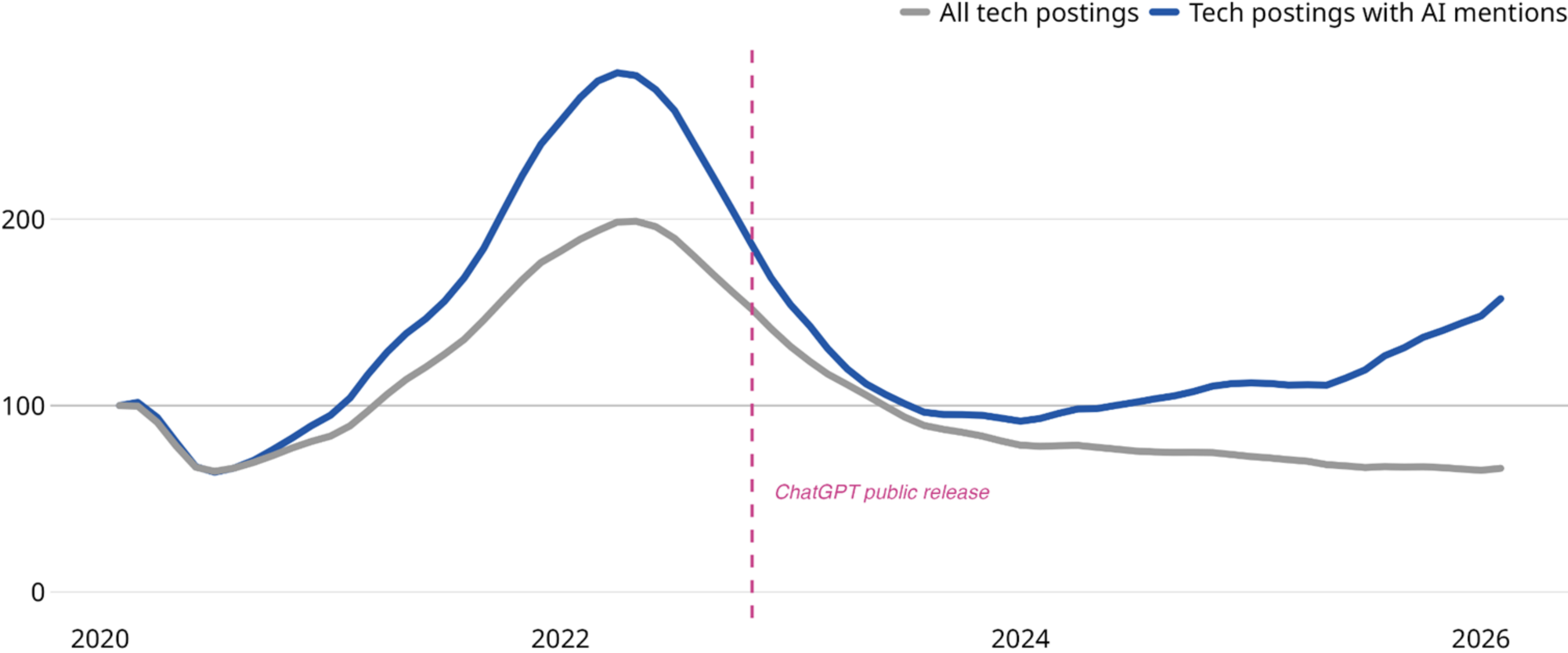


Source: Indeed



Tech postings with AI mentions are rising

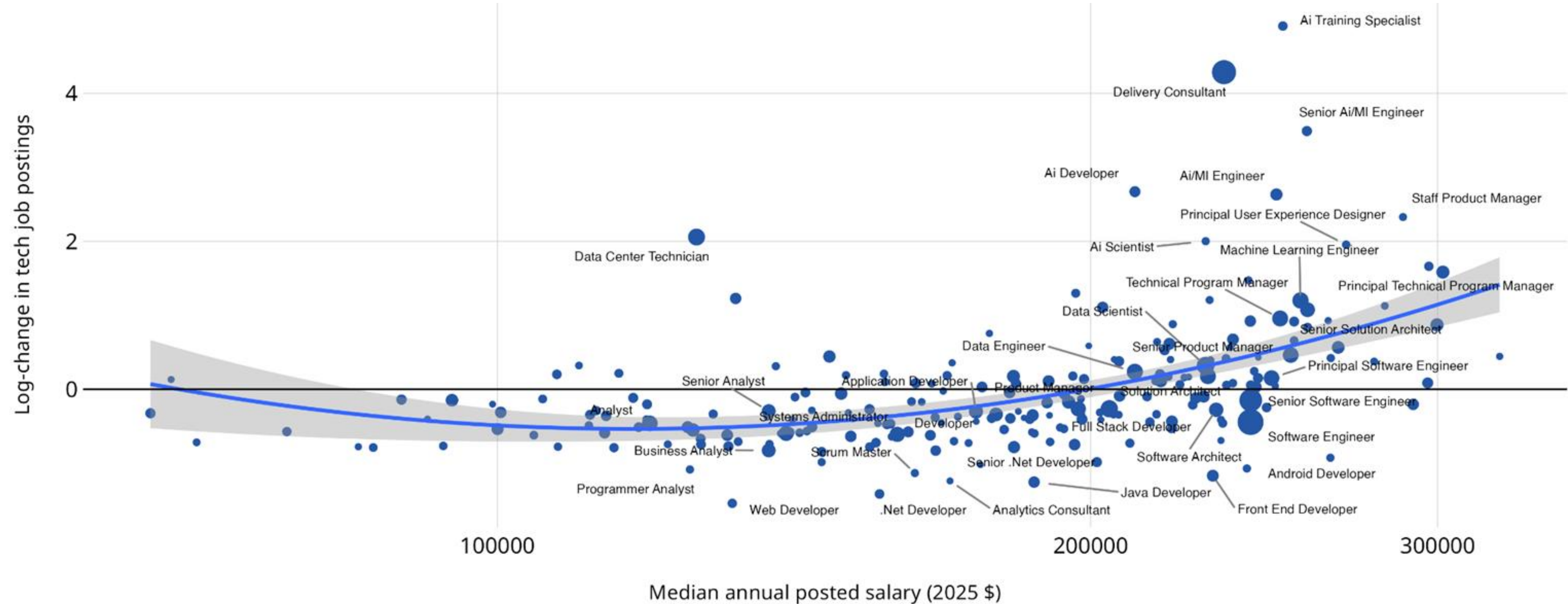
Job postings with AI mentioned compared to all postings in tech occupations, Feb 2020 to Feb 2026



Source: Indeed

Growth that is occurring in tech is being driven by AI

Job posting change (Q4 2019 to Q4 2025) vs posted salaries by tech job title



Source: Indeed, Minimum 1000 postings in Q4 2025,

Tech occupations include software development, information design, IT operations, mathematics



The economy today

Labor market has slowed considerably

Economy is adding few jobs overall, but unemployment and layoff rates remain low.

The Fed will have a tough job moving forward

The Federal Reserve will keep a close eye on inflation and the labor market, as both are deteriorating.

Upside/downside risks

Policy changes present several upside and downside risks to the economic outlook.

The 2026 outlook

Upside risk: Tax cuts and deregulation

Generally means faster economic growth, higher demand for workers, tighter labor markets

Downside risk: Tariff and economic uncertainty

Slower economic growth, less demand for workers, likely inflationary which can mean higher wage growth but lower levels of consumption

Downside risk: Immigration restrictions

Potential negative shock to labor supply, tighter labor markets, higher labor costs

Downside risk: Geopolitical Issues/War

Oil and gas prices continue to climb; supply shocks are likely in some sectors



Keep up with our research:

hiringlab.org

And data:

data.indeed.com

**Change fatigue isn't the problem.
Unclear process is.**

AdonisPARTNERS™
Creating Value Through Business Excellence

Coffee Break Sponsor | Find Us During the Break

A portrait of Katherine von Jan, a woman with long brown hair and glasses, wearing a dark blue top. The background behind her is a light blue gradient with a faint, stylized starburst pattern.

Using AI For Employee Culture

Katherine von Jan

Co-Founder | Tough Day

Hey, Virtual Attendees!

Are you ready to find Sparky?

In the next image you will be able to search for our Spark. If you find him, take a screenshot and post in the chat. The first person to find him and post the photo wins a prize!

ebot

Krimis

Romane



Karl Heinrich Waggenerl

NELSON MANDELA

SILKE ULSTEIN
IM EIN UND ALLES
POLAR NACHT

KOBR
LAURE VAN RENSBURG
GENOSSAME

AGATHA CHRISTIE
MISS MARPLE
AGATHA CHRISTIE
MISS MARPLE

ORST
KERT
VERBÄT
OPSEN
VERBÄT

INICIAM
INICIAM
INICIAM

ANNA

DER WALD

JOHN GRISHAM
ENTFÜHRUNG

Die Familie
Fairy Tale
HOLLY

TEJU COLE
TREMOR
DER GLAS
HUND

KALTE FLUT
LINDQVIST + BERTHOUD

LITERATUR
Dimitris

FRETTEN
FRETTEN
BOB ALDEN
BOB ALDEN


LIMBERLOST

IM UNTERHOLZ
IM UNTERHOLZ

IN ZEITEN DE

INICIAM
INICIAM

INICIAM



If Not You, Who?

The Breakthrough Strategy HR Needs to End Employee Disengagement

Jill Christensen

**Best-Selling Author & Award-Winning
Keynote Speaker**



If Not You, Who?

How to Crack the Code of
Employee Disengagement

The Reality

“

HR cannot
create well-
being in a system
that keeps
breaking people.





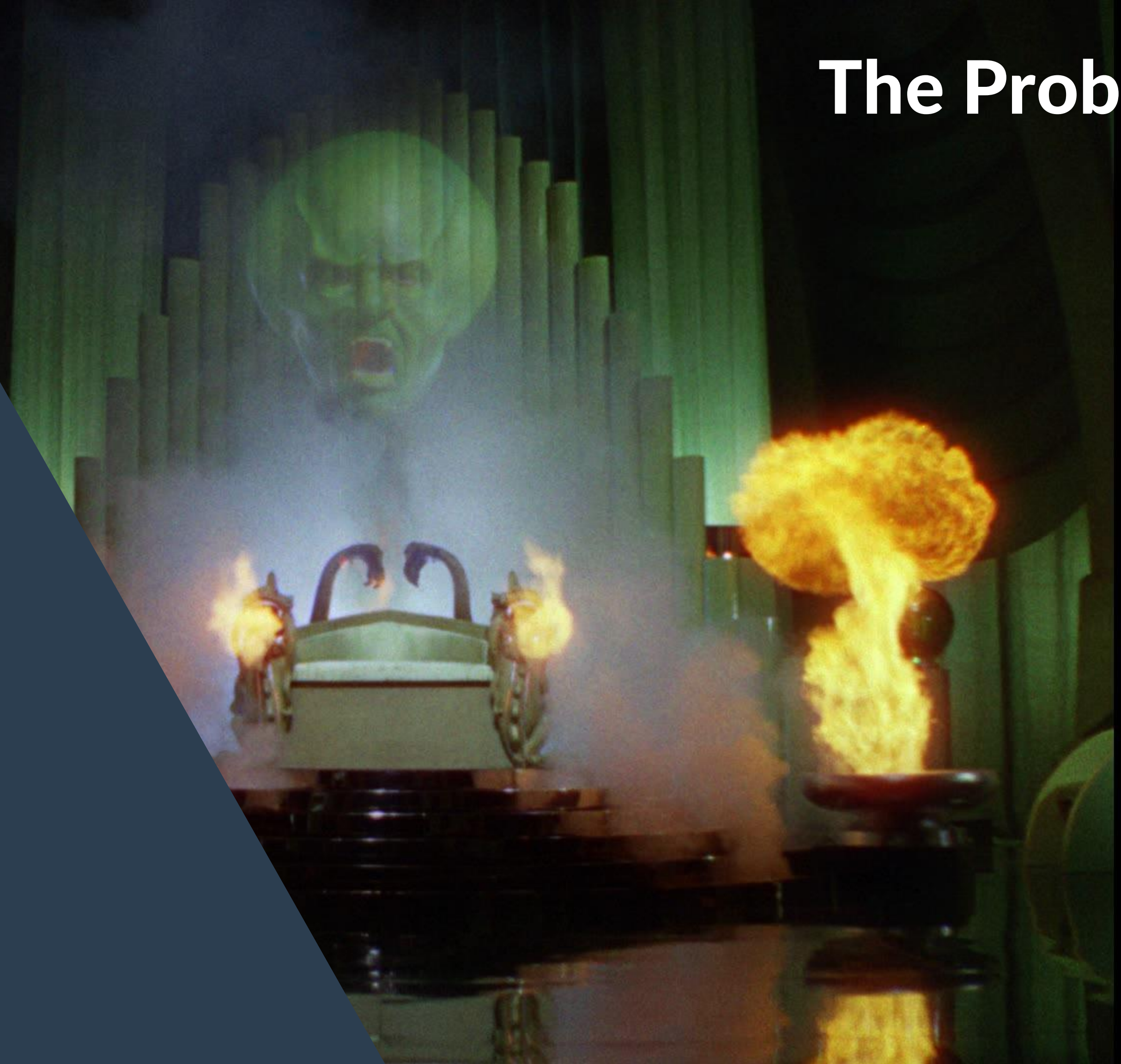
Employee Engagement Defined

**People trust their manager
and feel emotionally attached
to the organization**

The Problem

**77% OF
EMPLOYEES**

feel uninspired and
only do the bare
minimum at work

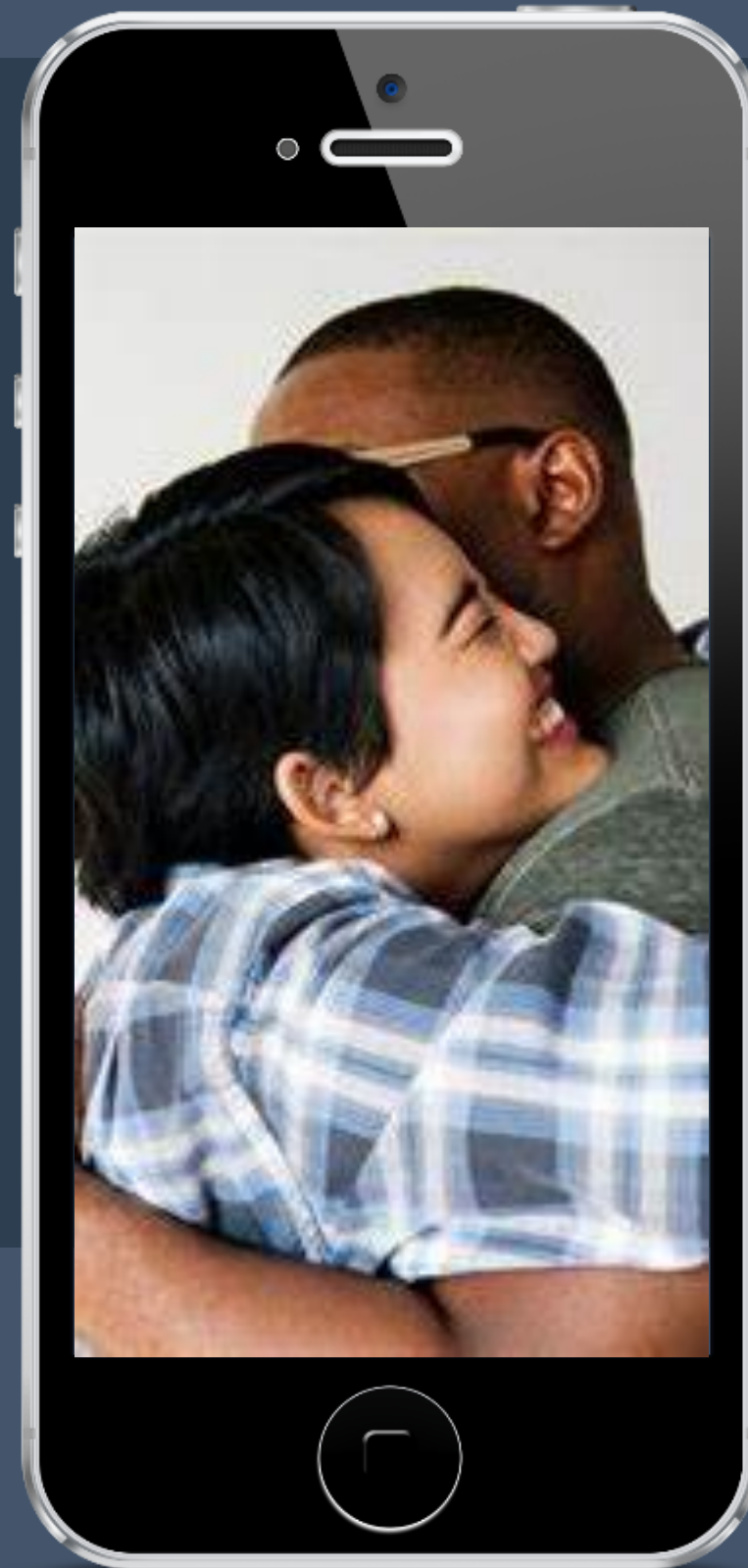


The Great Disconnect

EMPLOYEES

- Trust management
- Sense of purpose
- Feel valued
- Flexible schedule

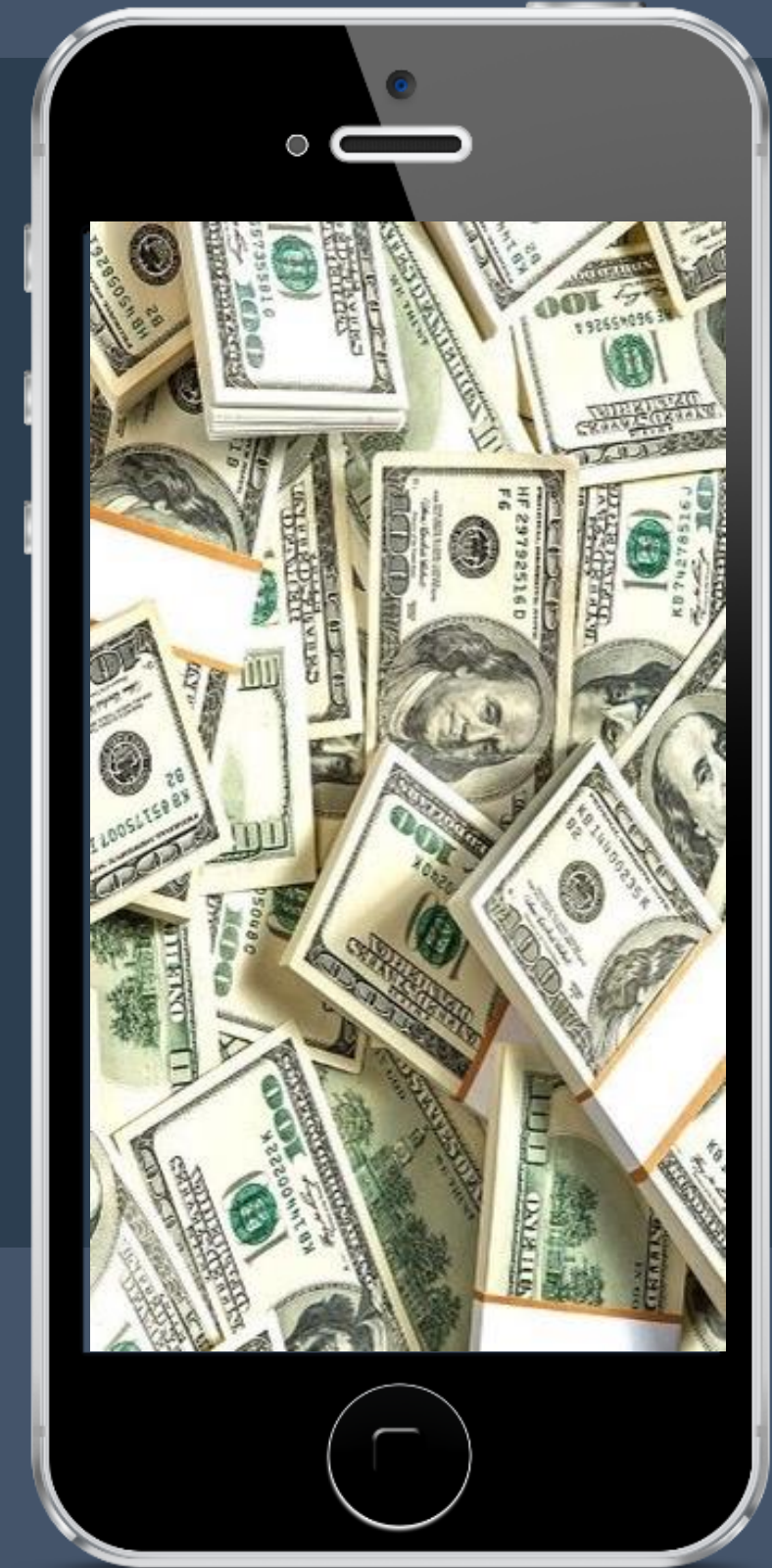
VALUE **Connection**



MANAGERS

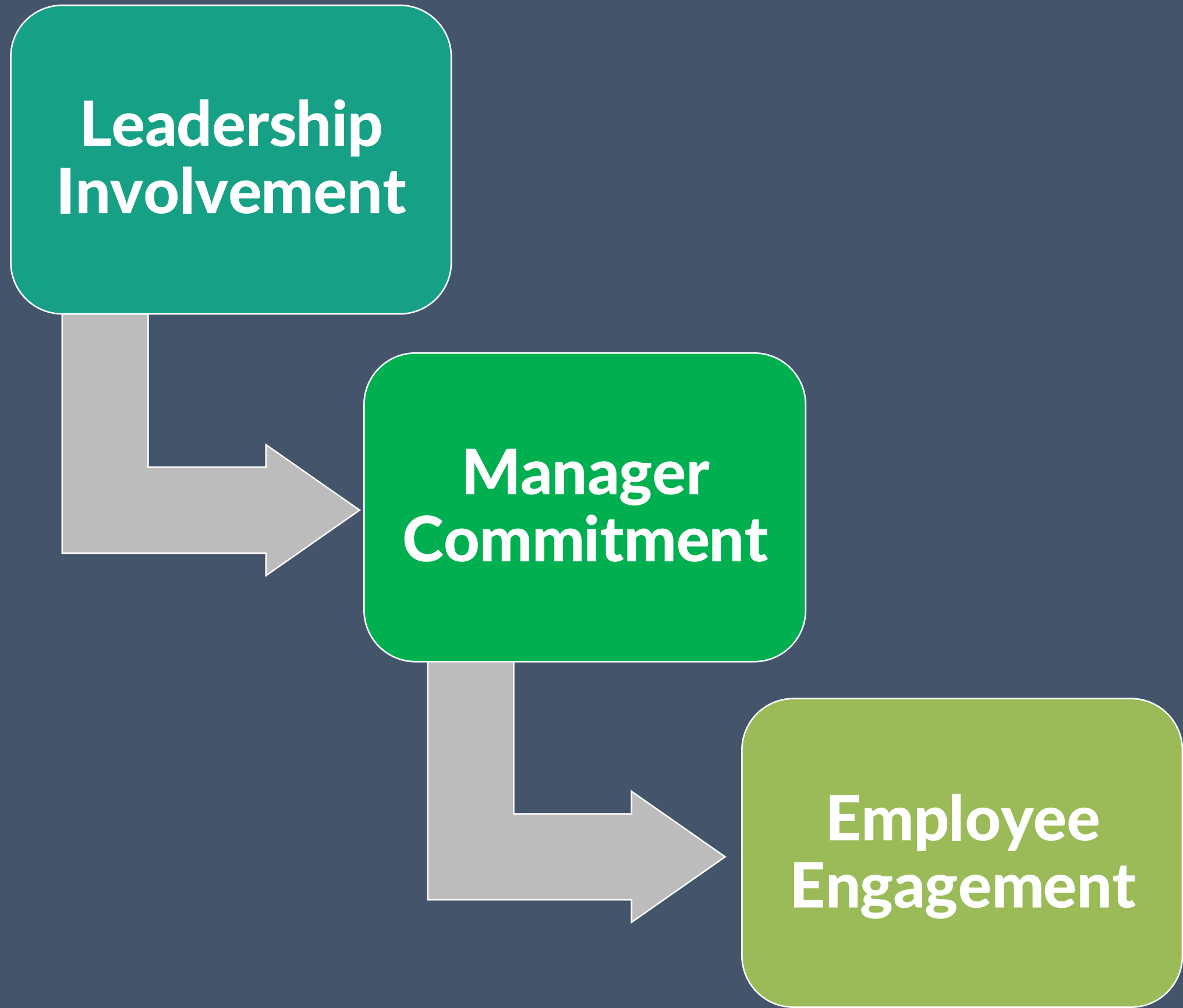
- More money
- Better benefits
- More development
- Remote work

VALUE **Results**





Your Strategy



The Consequences



ENGAGEABILITY

The science of making work irresistible

1. Trust
2. Connection
3. Two-Way Communication
4. Recognition



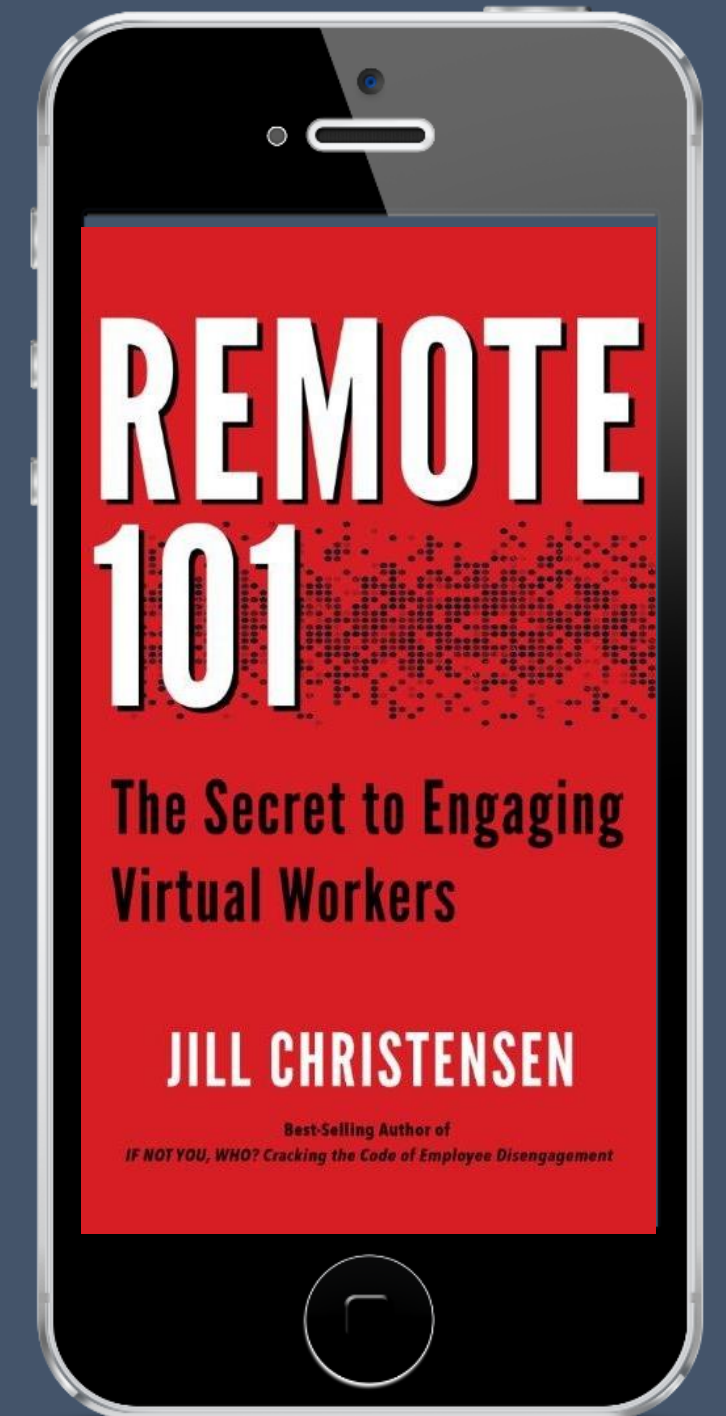
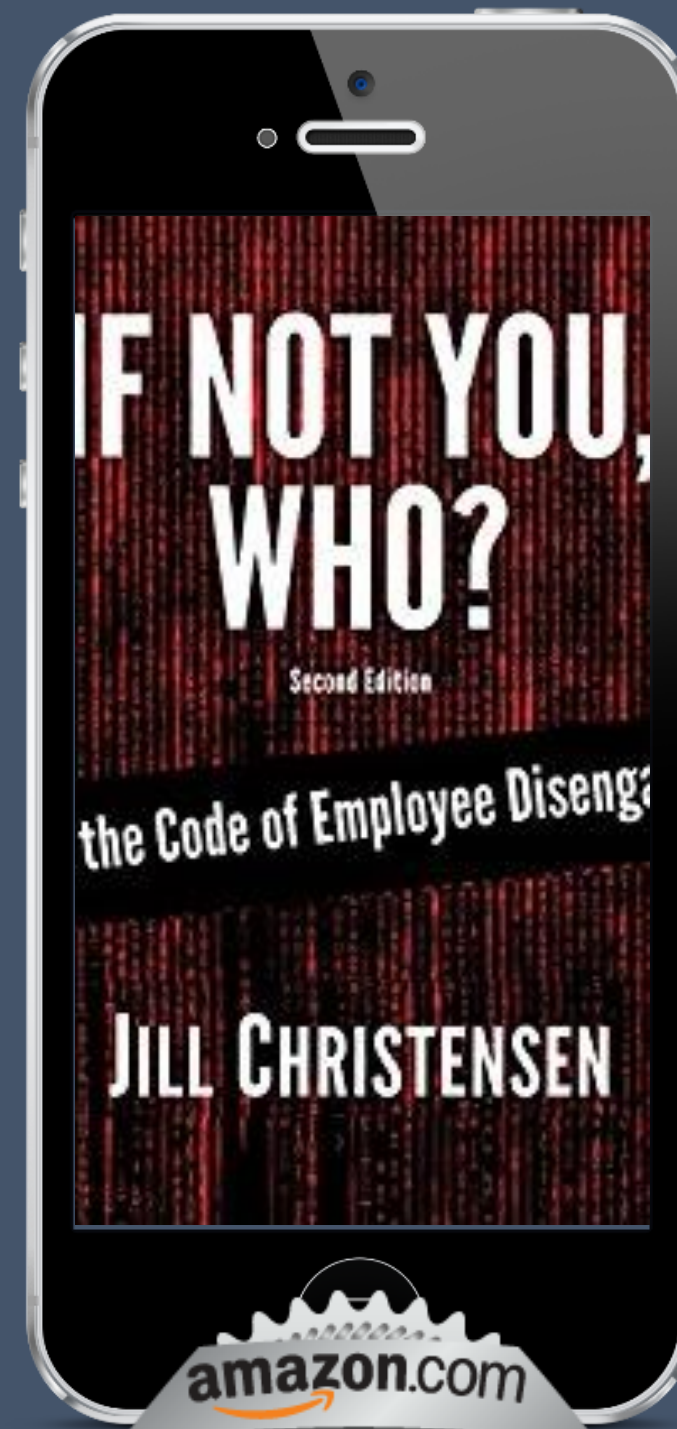


Bad

Call to Action

- Don't act like a flying monkey.
- Start the conversation with a leader.
- Measure success and then claim your seat at the table.

The Resources



Key Takeaways

- Employees are our greatest asset
- Engagement is simple: meet employee's needs
- 'Start the Conversation' with a leader

YOU HAD THE POWER ALL
ALONG, MY DEAR.

~ GLINDA, THE GOOD WITCH



The Truth

You've Got This!

JILL CHRISTENSEN
international



The Power of the Pen: Building Culture and Connecting in the Workplace in a Digital World

Rod Gray

**National Corporate Accounts Director |
Drylock Technologies**

2026 HR CONFERENCE · TECH ENABLED. PEOPLE CENTERED.

THE POWER OF THE PEN

Building Culture and Connecting in the Workplace in a Digital World

Presented by **Rod Gray**

National Corporate Accounts Director, Drylock Technologies



InkPowerOfThePen.com



A little about me...



What if the secret to
connecting in this digital
world *fit in your hand?*



Quick Questions...

- 1 Texted before getting out of bed?
- 2 Emailed before coffee?
- 3 Wrote a handwritten note today?



The Paradox

We have never communicated and been more connected in human history:

- **Emails**
- **Texts**
- **Cell Phones**
- **Social Media Apps**
- **AI**

Yet so many people feel:

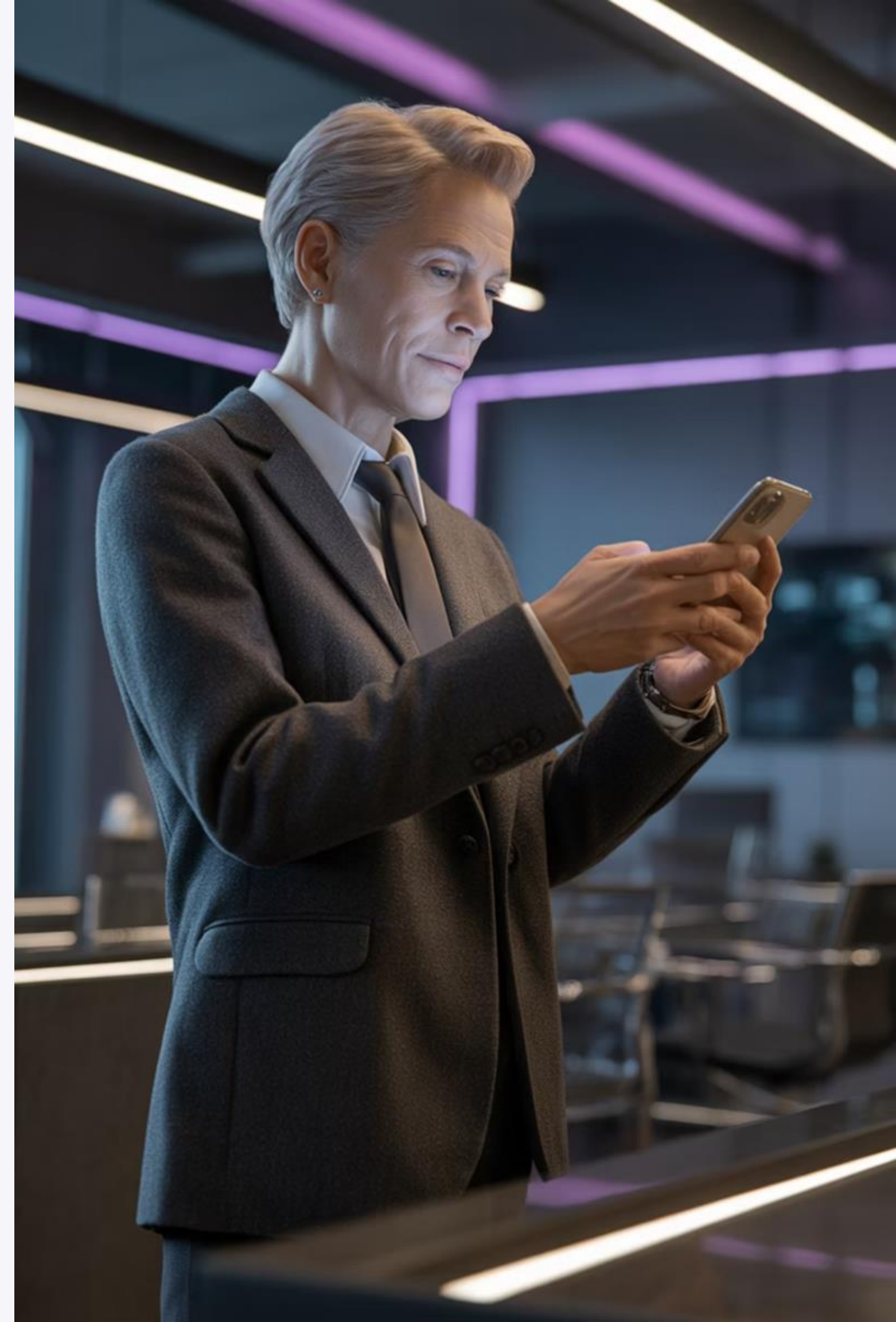
- **More lonely**
- **Less connected**
- **Unrecognized**
- **Overlooked**
- **Unheard**



The Digital Reality

Texts

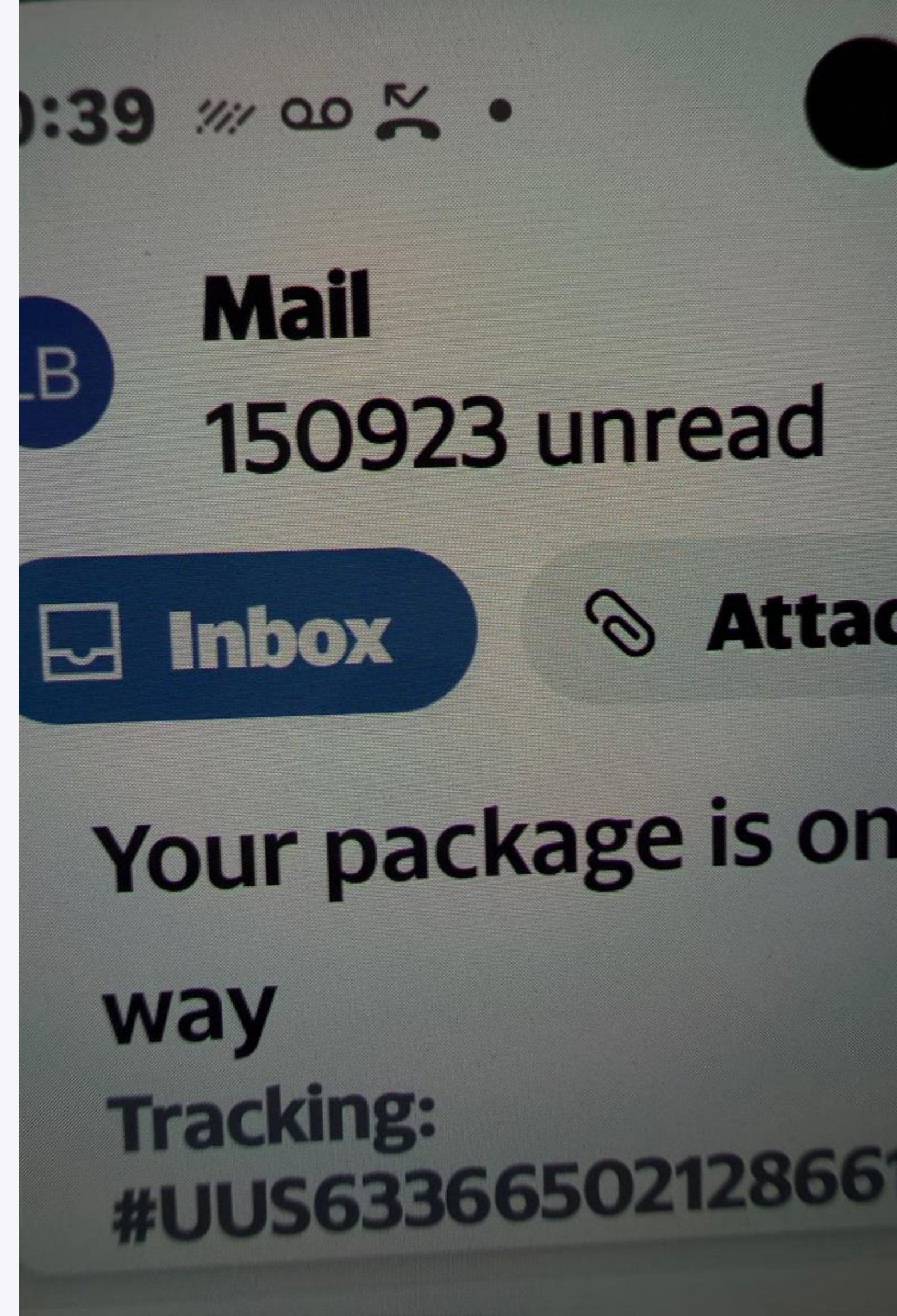
- **6 billion texts are sent daily.**
- **81% of Americans use text messaging.**
- **Average user receives 41 text messages daily.**
- **75% of texts are read.**



The Digital Reality

Emails

- 10 billion received daily in the U.S.
- Average user receives 100–120 emails daily.
- Average open rate: 18–22%.
- 80% of emails are skimmed.
- Average inbox has 1,000 unread emails.
- 67% of users have unread emails.
- 42% feel email is an effective form of communication.



**Something Old School, Is Your
New Secret Weapon**

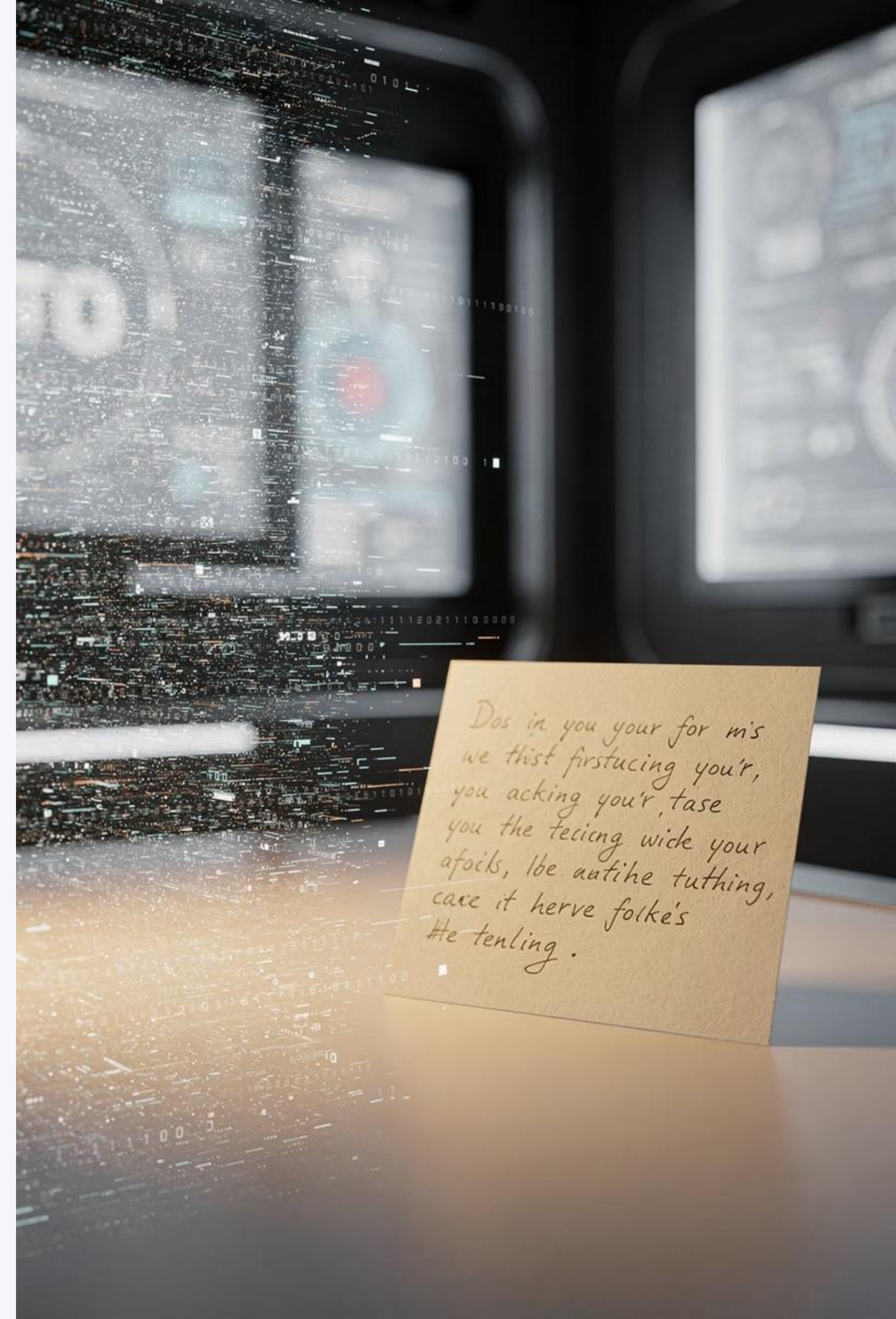
Handwritten notes

Slow. Personal. Powerful.



The More Digital the World Becomes...

*The more powerful authentic connection
becomes.*



The Reality of Handwritten Communication

- 42% of Americans receive only 3 or 4 handwritten notes annually.
- 33% receive none.
- Average time to write a meaningful note: 3 minutes.
- 90% open rate (due to the personal nature of the communication).
- 70% say physical mail feels more personal.

“A handwritten note proves a human showed up.”

– Rod Gray



InkPowerOfThePen.com

Today's Journey

1. The Psychology of Handwritten Communication

2. Where Handwritten Moments Fit in the Employee Lifecycle

3. How Technology & AI Enhance Human Connection

4. How Leaders Build a Culture of Appreciation

Topic 1:

The Psychology of Handwritten Communication

- Signals effort
- Feels personal
- Creates emotional impact
- Builds stronger memory
- Shows authenticity
- Slows the moment
- Stands out
- Strengthens connection
- Increases perceived value
- Creates a lasting keepsake



Seen

Recognized for their unique contributions and individual efforts.

Valued

Understood as more than a role — as a whole person who matters.

Appreciated

Thanked in ways that feel genuine, personal, and lasting.

How Writing by Hand Rewires the Brain

- **Activates more brain regions**
- **Strengthens neural connections**
- **Improves memory**
- **Increases focus**
- **Deepens thinking**
- **Engages motor skills**
- **Sparks creativity**
- **Builds emotional connection**
- **Slows reflection**
- **Makes ideas stick**



The Power of Handwritten Communication....

The Numbers Don't Lie

90%

Open Rate

Physical mail is opened about
90% of the time.

70%

Feel Personal

Of people say physical mail feels
more personal than digital.

Why Does It Stand Out?

Because physical communication requires something digital messages do not:

Time — someone carved out a moment for you

Effort — they made a deliberate choice to reach out

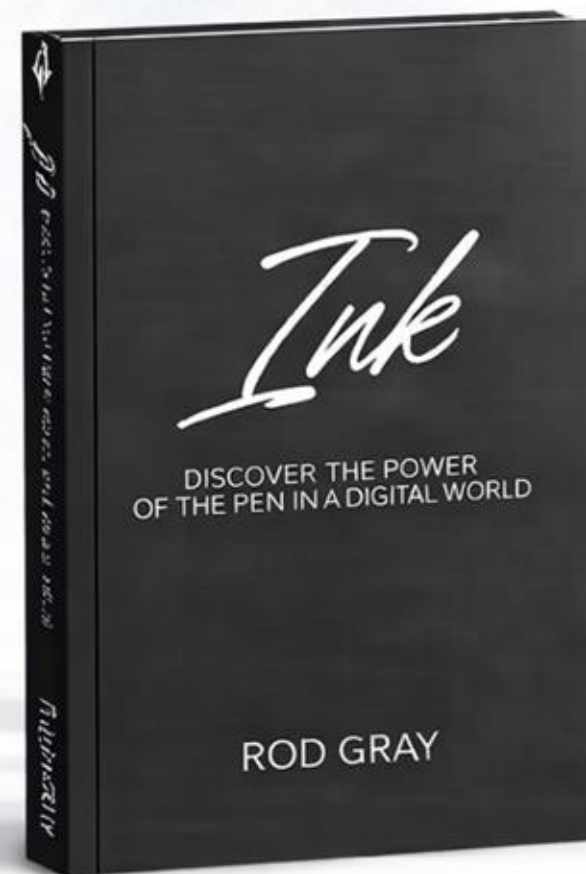
Thought — they considered what to say

Intention — they wanted you to feel something

And people can feel the difference every time.

“A handwritten note is
proof someone slowed down
long enough to care.”

– Rod Gray



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TOPIC 2

Where Handwritten Moments Fit in the Employee Lifecycle

From First Day to Farewell

- **Recruitment**
- **Offer Stage**
- **First Day**
- **Onboarding**
- **Early Wins**
- **Milestones**
- **Performance Moments**
- **Tough Seasons**
- **Retention**
- **Touchpoints**
- **Off-boarding**



Examples Across the Employee Lifecycle

“People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.”



Before Day One

- Interview thank-you note
- Candidate encouragement
- Welcome note before start date



Early Employment

- First-week encouragement
- Early recognition note
- Personal welcome from leadership



During Employment

- Birthday cards
- Work anniversary milestones
- Project completion thank-you



Difficult Seasons

- Sympathy cards
- Support during illness
- Encouragement during transition

KEY IDEA #2

Handwritten Communication in the Workplace Provides...

- Deeper Connections
- Better Performance
- Healthier Culture
- Improved Well-Being

TOPIC 3

How Technology & AI Enhance Human Connection

- Expands reach
- Enables real-time communication
- Personalizes communication at scale.
- Reminds us to care
- Amplifies recognition and appreciation.
- Strengthens team collaboration and alignment.
- Gives everyone a voice
- Saves time on tasks
- Bridges digital to personal connection.
- Scales culture consistently across the organization.



Technology Is Not the Enemy — It's the Assistant

2 Notes/Week = 104 Annual Connections

- **Stronger Engagement**
- **Higher Retention**
- **Deeper Connections**
- **Better Performance**
- **Healthier Culture**
- **Improved Well-Being**



Who Has Kept a Note?

How many of you have at least one letter or handwritten note that someone gave you — that you have kept?

1

Information Transfers

Email, text, and digital tools move data efficiently from one person to another.

2

Emotion Connects

Handwritten notes move something deeper — they reach the heart, not just the inbox.

3

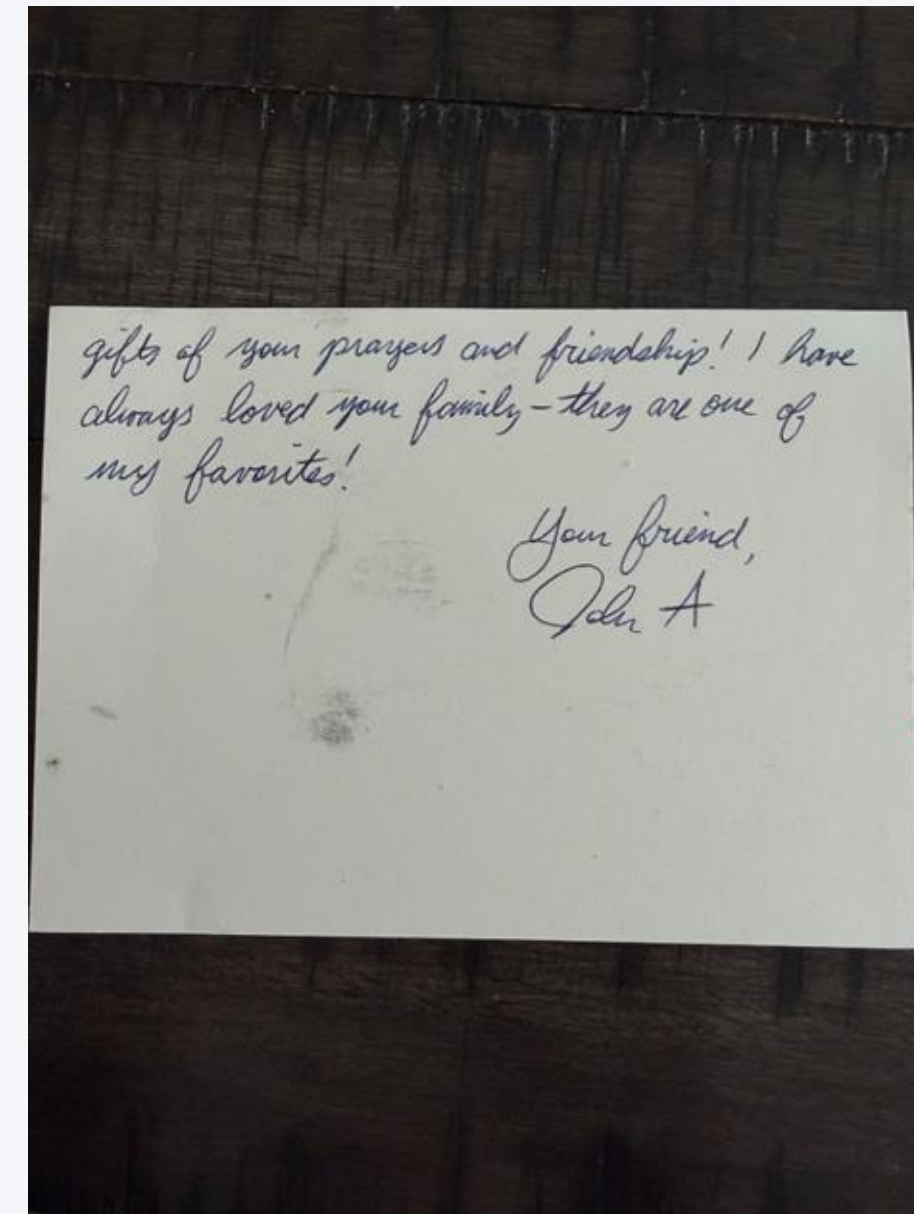
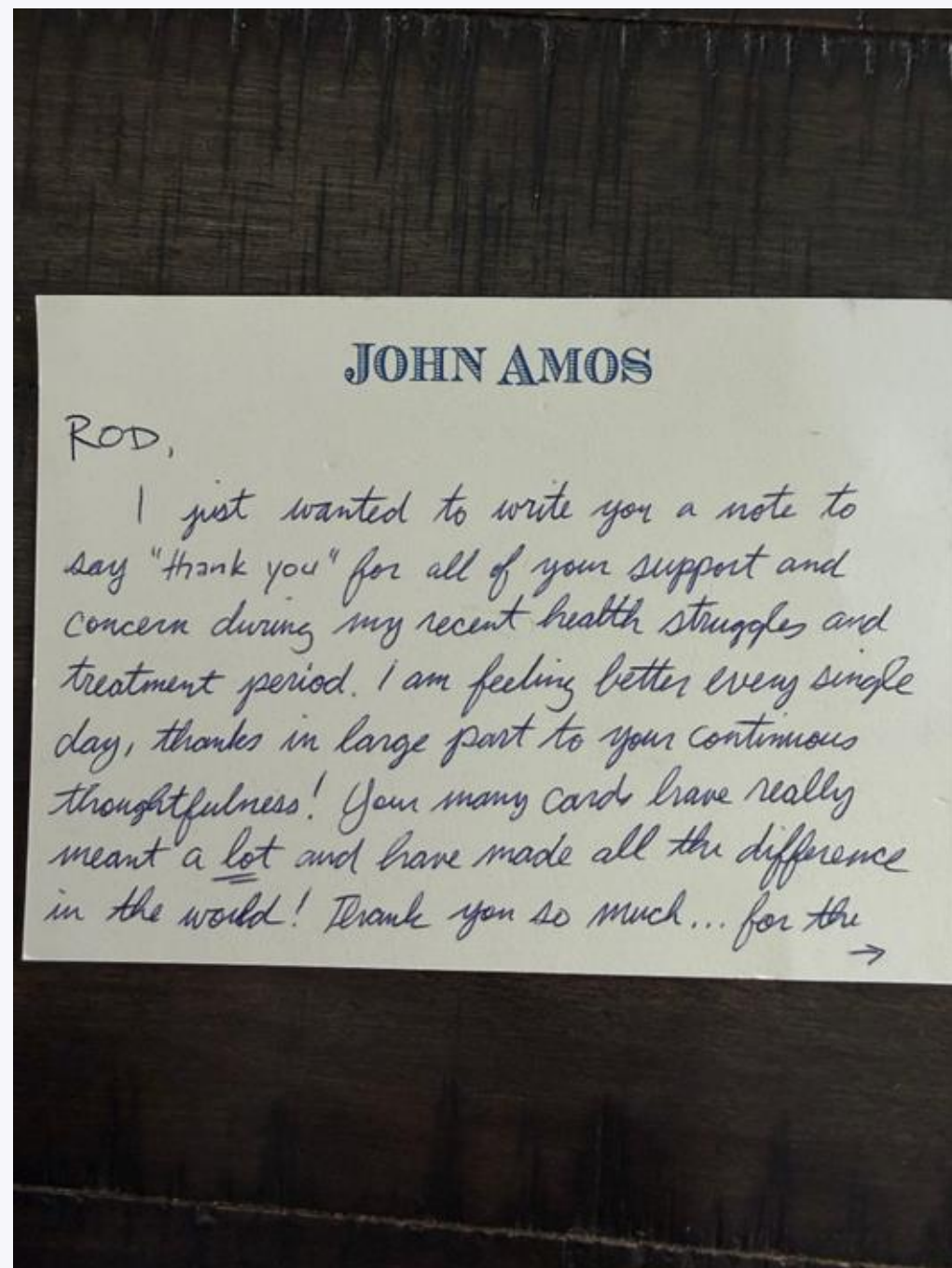
Memory Preserves

We hold onto what made us feel valued. Those notes become part of our story.

A Note I Still Keep

Unexpected. Personal. Powerful. Inspiration for my book INK.

www.inkpowerofthepen.com



**Technology Makes Communication
Faster and Smarter.**

**Handwritten communication makes
it meaningful and memorable.**

**The future belongs to leaders who
use both well.**

TOPIC 4

How Leaders Build a Culture of Appreciation

How Leaders Build a Culture of Appreciation

- **Model it first**
- **Be specific**
- **Make it timely**
- **Be consistent**
- **Personalize it**
- **Use handwritten notes for deeper impact.**
- **Celebrate effort, not just outcomes.**
- **Create peer-to-peer recognition.**
- **Tie recognition to core values.**
- **Make it visible**



Recognition Drives Culture

- Reinforces what matters most.
- Turns values into visible behaviors.
- Builds trust and loyalty.
- Increases engagement and morale.
- Encourages peer-to-peer appreciation.
- Strengthens retention.
- Humanizes leadership.
- Creates momentum people want to repeat.

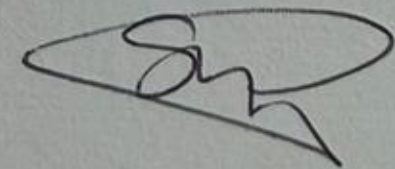


Thank
you

ROD

I WANTED TO THANK YOU FOR THE
SUPERBOWL SHIRT YOU SENT MY WAY.
THAT WAS VERY THOUGHTFUL AND I
APPRECIATE IT.

I ALSO WANTED TO THANK YOU FOR THE
GREAT JOB YOU ARE DOING IN YOUR NEW
ROLE, KEEP SWINGING AWAY. YOU ARE
GOING TO CONTACT SOON.





25,000 Handwritten Notes

Former Home Depot CEO wrote notes every Sunday to associates.

Frank Blake told his HR team: **"You must make employees know the organization is invested in their success."** That is what appreciation does — consistently and powerfully.

The Message Every Leader Needs to Send...

We See You

Your work is noticed. Your presence has impact. You are not invisible here.

We Value You

You matter as a person — not just as a role, a title, or a line on an org chart.

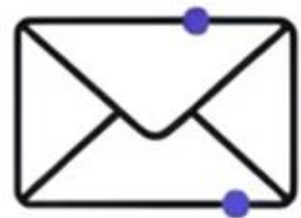
We're Invested in

You Your growth, your success, and your wellbeing are part of what we care about.

When that message is delivered consistently — it stops being a gesture. It becomes **culture**.

Every Communication Method Has Its Role

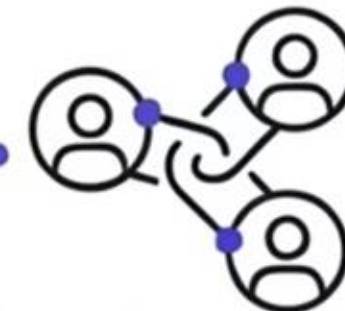
The goal is not to replace digital communication. The goal is to elevate human connection within a world full of digital tools. Great leaders use every channel intentionally.



Email - delivers information, paper trail



Text - provides speed, urgency



Social Media - creates visibility, reach



AI - efficiency, personalization



Zoom/Teams - convenience, real-time collab



Handwritten - meaning, impact

Five Simple Ways to Make Handwriting a Habit

Building a culture of appreciation starts with individual consistency. Here are five simple, practical steps to get started today.

01

Schedule regular time

02

Create a stationery corner

03

Lead by example

04

Recognize the behavior

05

Use: Name + Behavior + Impact

Common Excuses — Let's Address Them

"I don't have time."

Most handwritten notes take **less than 60 seconds** to write. If you have time to send an email, you have time to write a note.

"I don't know what to say."

Use this simple formula: **Name. Behavior. Impact.** Acknowledge who they are, what they did, and why it mattered.

"My handwriting isn't good."

Sincerity matters more than perfection. No one has ever thrown away a note because the handwriting wasn't beautiful.

**Don't Let Bad
Handwriting Be an
Excuse!**

Hey, this will give
you an idea of how
bad my handwriting really
is. My fingers are getting
worse and worse.

I hope you are doing well
my friends. The snow
was beautiful, but melted
rapidly.

Please give your family
my love

Love you brother!

Jimmy

Recognition Drives Culture

- Reinforces what matters most
- Turns values into visible behaviors
- Builds trust and loyalty
- Increases engagement and morale
- Encourages peer-to-peer appreciation
- Strengthens retention
- Humanizes leadership
- Creates momentum people want to repeat

Rod,

It is so awesome to have you on the team and work with you. I have observed such amazing growth in you as a leader. I appreciate you and what you do and how you do it sooooo much.

I am proud of both your individual and your collective contributions to our sales success. You continue to impress with your commitment, effort, creativeness, finding different ways to build stronger relationships, emotional intelligence, ...

You are a very impressive Sales Leader and even a better human being !!

Looking forward to an awesome 2018.

P.S. Not sure if I shared with you how impressed I was with your Emotional

Intelligence in how you handled conflict with Leah. It was **THIS HOLIDAY SEASON, WE'RE THANKFUL FOR YOU!**
WARMEST WISHES TO YOU & off the charts
YOURS FROM YOUR FRIENDS AT **great!!**

2018 Team Mantras



Innovation. Quality. Care.

E+R=O Let's improve our R's in '18.

No BCD. No Blaming. Complaining. Defending



A donation to the American Red Cross
Disaster Relief Fund was made in your honor.

How Leaders Build a Culture of Appreciation

- **Model it first**
- **Be specific**
- **Make it timely**
- **Be consistent**
- **Personalize it**
- **Use handwritten notes for deeper impact**
- **Celebrate effort, not just outcomes**
- **Create peer-to-peer recognition**
- **Tie recognition to core values**



Who Needs to Hear from You?

Employee

Co-worker

Colleague

Mentor

Family Member

Friend

Pen, card, and envelope provided.



Your Turn — Write Your First Note

Take 3 minutes right now and write your note.

Step 1: Think

Who came to mind during the reflection exercise? Start with that person.

Step 2: Write

Use the formula: Name. Behavior. Impact.
Keep it simple. Keep it real.

Step 3: Send It

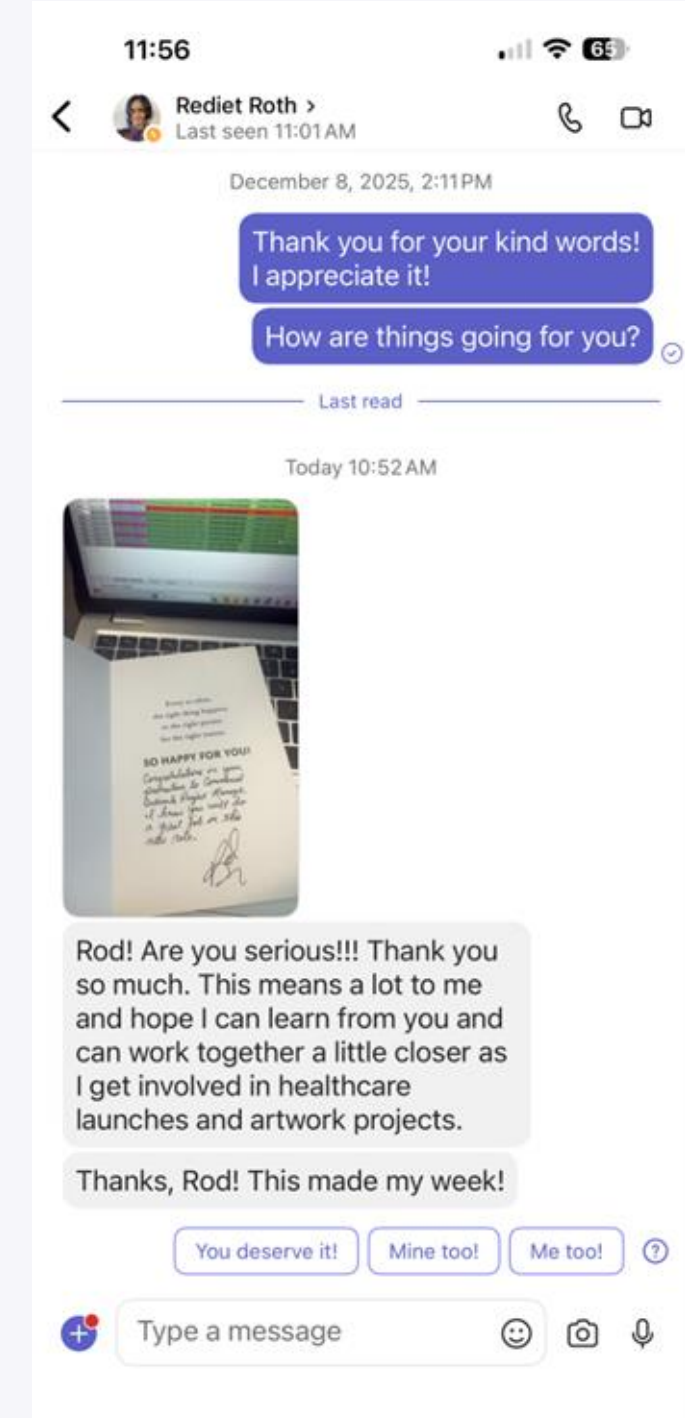
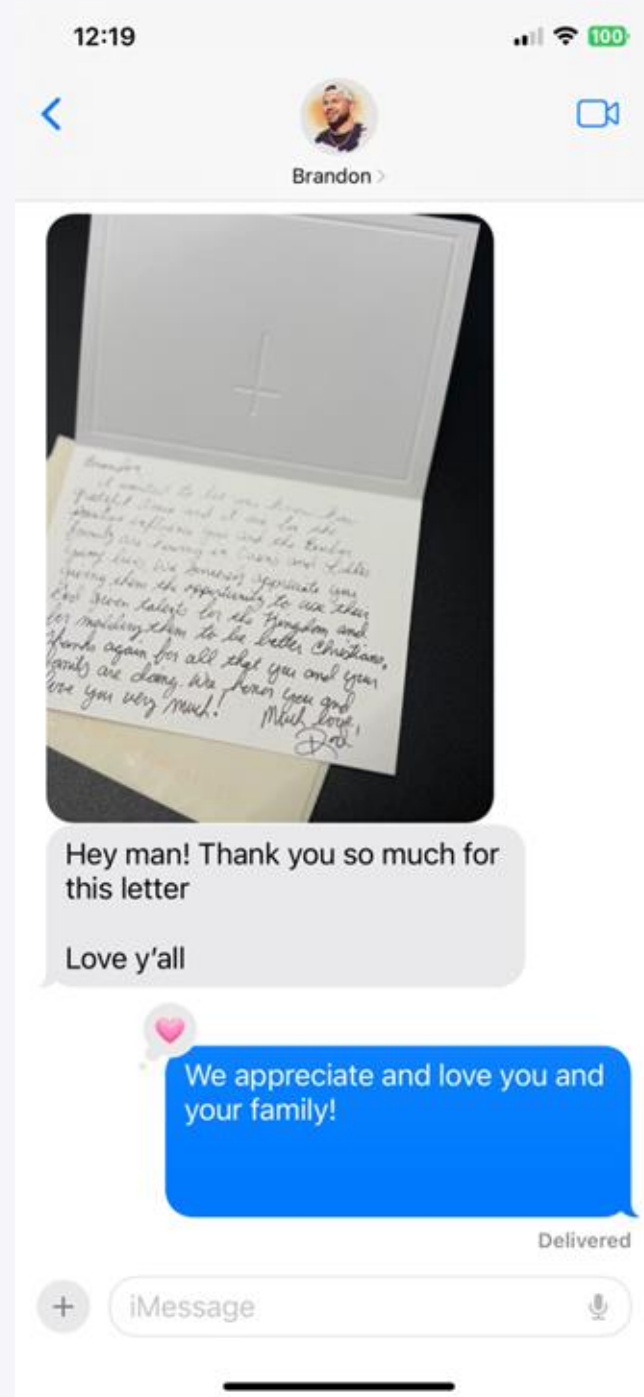
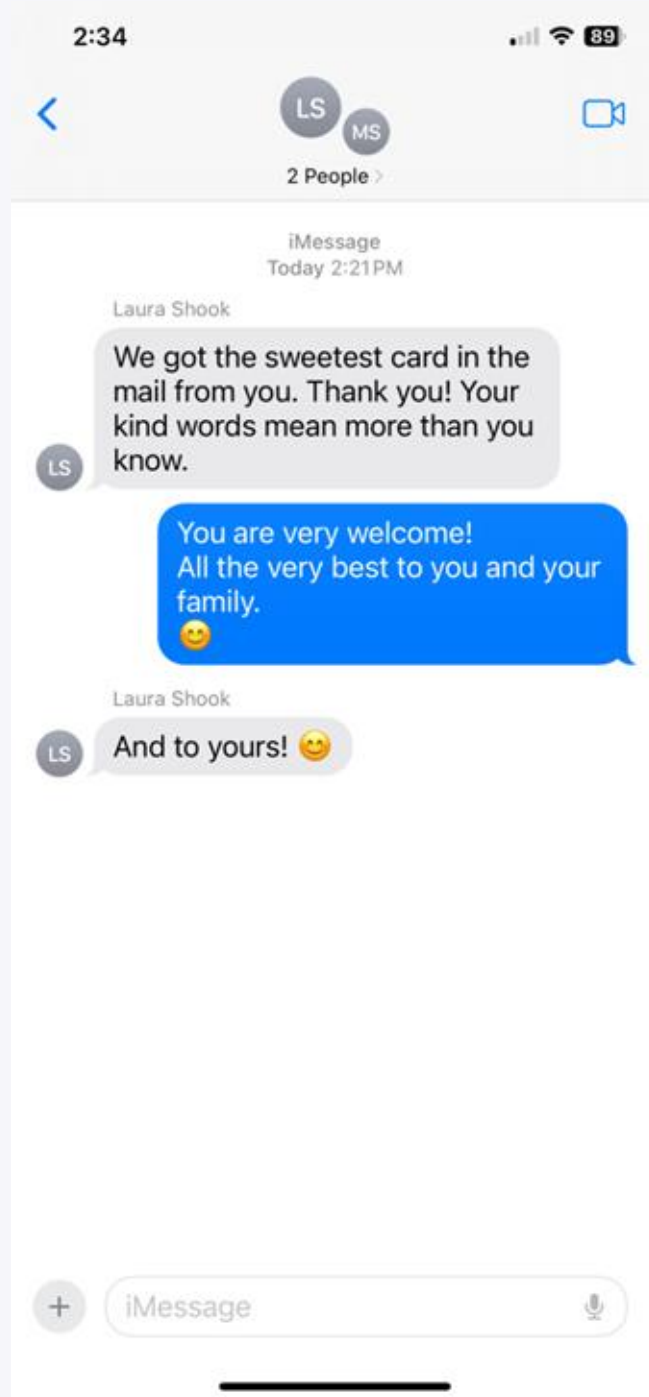
Don't leave it in your notebook. Put it in the mail. Deliver it in person. Give it wings.

It doesn't have to be perfect. It just needs to be real.

The Letter I'm So Glad I Wrote

- ❑ **Gratitude delayed can become gratitude never expressed. The people in your life who deserve to hear from you — they deserve to hear it *now*. Don't wait for a better moment. This is the moment.**



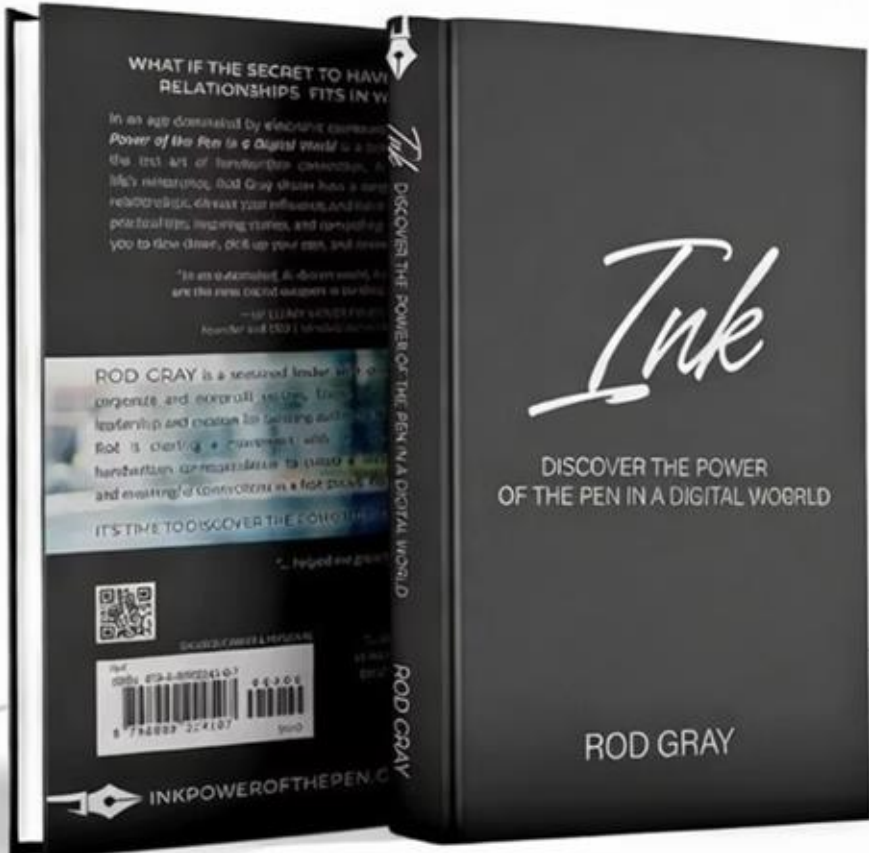


"Feeling gratitude and not expressing it is like wrapping a present and not giving it." — William Arthur Ward

Questions & Answers

Thank you for your time today.

YOU'VE GOT THE POWER!



InkPowerOfThePen.com



CATAPULT

Everything HR. One partner.

From day-one compliance to executive coaching — every service Catapult offers, on one team.





Our Mission:

We provide employers with the confidence to navigate everyday operational challenges, making workplaces more effective and employees more successful.



**Who Found
Sparky?**

Join our waitlist



**SCAN TO JOIN THE WAITLIST FOR OUR 2027
HR CONFERENCE — AND SAVE 20%.**



**The 2027 HR Conference will be hosted in
Charlotte, NC, next March!**

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When we set out to create an unforgettable conference experience, we knew it would take a community.

On behalf of Catapult, we extend our deepest gratitude to our incredible partners and sponsors—your support and commitment were instrumental in bringing this event to life.



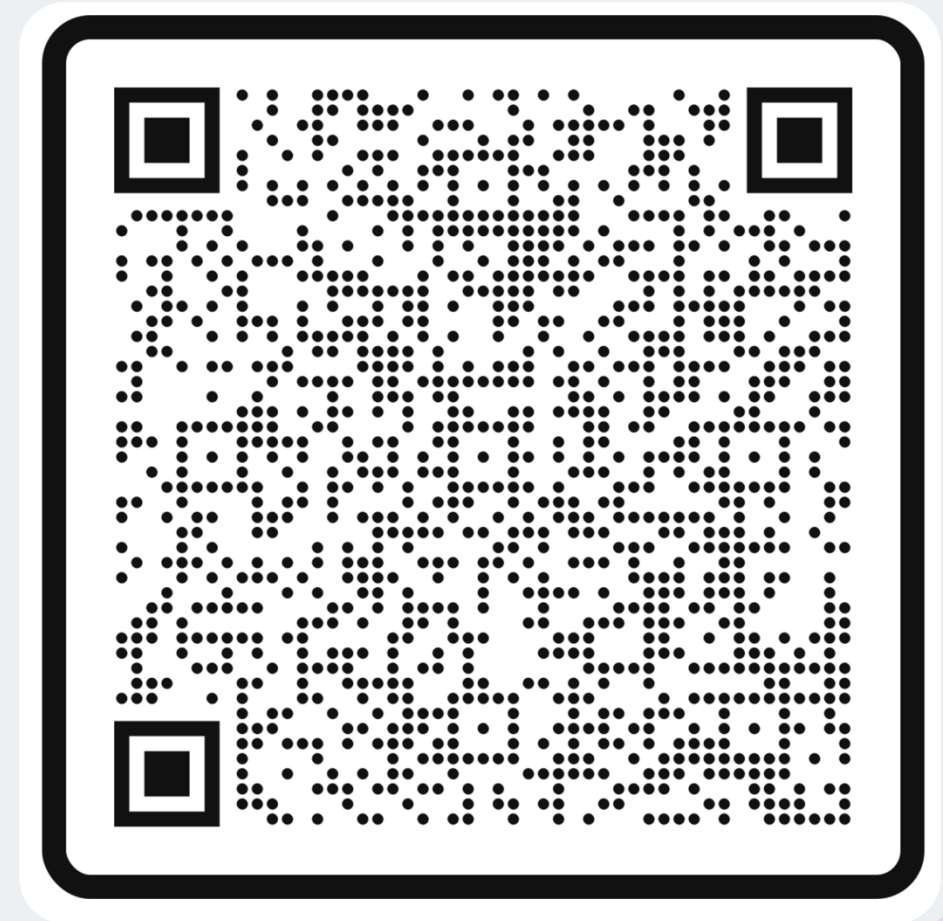
Thank You To Our Sponsors!





**Let's solve
your people
problems.**

letscatapult.org



Scan to talk to our team