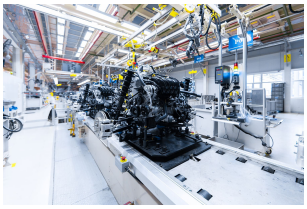

Evolving Pressures on the Automotive Workforce: Key Trends and Employer Strategies

May 20, 2026

Categories:

Publications

Authors:

Malik Luckett
Heather L. Wilson

As part of FBT Gibbons' AutoConnect® 2026 program in Nashville, TN, Heather Wilson moderated a panel examining the forces reshaping the automotive workforce. Panelists included Jesse Dove (Executive Director of Labor Relations, Bridgestone Americas); Emma Jay (Deputy General Counsel, Subaru of Indiana Automotive); David Janklow (Partner, FBT Gibbons); and Suzanne Meredith (Director of Litigation and Employment Law, Toyota Material Handling North America).

The discussion highlighted a convergence of technological, economic, and regulatory shifts that are forcing employers in the automotive sector to rethink how they recruit, train, and retain talent. Below are the key themes and practical takeaways for employers navigating this evolving landscape.

Electrification and Technology

The shift towards hybrid and electric vehicles is a fundamental workforce transformation when compared with the skills needed by prior generations of auto workers. As one panelist noted, "electronic technology now touches almost everything from a legal perspective."

In response, employers are increasingly:

- Retraining existing employees;
- Investing heavily in on-the-job and "train-the-trainer" models; and
- Emphasizing adaptability and problem-solving over traditional skillsets.

This transition also introduces new safety considerations, particularly around battery technology and fire hazards, requiring expanded training protocols and an increase in compliance oversight. From a legal and operational standpoint, this means that

2026 FBT Gibbons LLP. All rights reserved. ADVERTISING MATERIAL.

safety programs must evolve alongside technology, and training must continue to be documented and defensible.

Automation is Reshaping Roles, Not Eliminating Them

Automation has shifted the focus on traditional labor toward greater demand for highly skilled workers. One panelist emphasized that while there will always be a need for workers, the roles are changing. Modern manufacturing roles involve equipment monitoring rather than manual production, higher technical proficiency with advanced systems, and greater collaboration across teams.

An interesting note from the panel was that automation may also increase job satisfaction among workers. Employees are transitioning into more technical, "preferred" roles with higher engagement and ownership over equipment and processes.

Tariffs and Economic Volatility

Tariffs have been a source of unpredictability, impacting everything from production volume to hiring decisions. For employers, the increased costs may reduce production output, leading to workforce adjustments. And hiring strategies appear to be shifting toward more temporary or contingent-labor models. This uncertainty places pressure on employers to avoid overreacting to

2026 FBT Gibbons LLP. All rights reserved. ADVERTISING MATERIAL.

short-term changes, maintain operational flexibility, and align workforce planning with rapidly shifting economic conditions.

The Expanding Talent Gap

A recurring theme across the panel was the growing difficulty in filling critical roles, with approximately 75% of automotive employers struggling to bridge talent gaps.

This challenge appears to be more complex due to several factors:

- An aging workforce is creating significant institutional knowledge gaps.
- Fewer workers are entering skilled trades.
- Demand is increasing for maintenance technicians and robotics specialists.

As one panelist explained, employers are now trying to figure out how to transfer knowledge that exists in someone's head — not in a handbook.

In response to this issue, companies are expanding apprenticeship and training programs, partnering with community colleges, high schools, and trade schools, and creating new entry-level technical roles to build pipelines.

Another challenge for OEMs and suppliers is immigration policy, which continues to play a significant role in workforce availability and specialized positions. Panelists noted that employers face increased scrutiny around visa programs, and HR departments are taking on expanded compliance responsibilities. Despite this, some companies that were once hesitant to rely on immigration are now recognizing it as a key source of talent.

This article identifies some key considerations for employers in the automotive industry, drawing on insights shared during the "Workforce Transformation" panel at AutoConnect 2026. For more information, please contact the authors or any attorney with FBT Gibbons' Mobility Industry and Labor & Employment teams.

© 2026 FBT Gibbons LLP. May be considered attorney advertising in some jurisdictions.

2026 FBT Gibbons LLP. All rights reserved. ADVERTISING MATERIAL.

FBT Gibbons