

Finding **Heart** in the Agentic Era

SPACE, NOT SPEED: THE TRUE VALUE OF AGENTIC AI

By Stacey Lane, Chief Executive Officer, Staffmark Group



A Staffmark Series
(PART 1 OF 3)

In this three-part series, Staffmark leaders dig into how they are making agentic AI a key part of the employment journey... but not the heart of it.

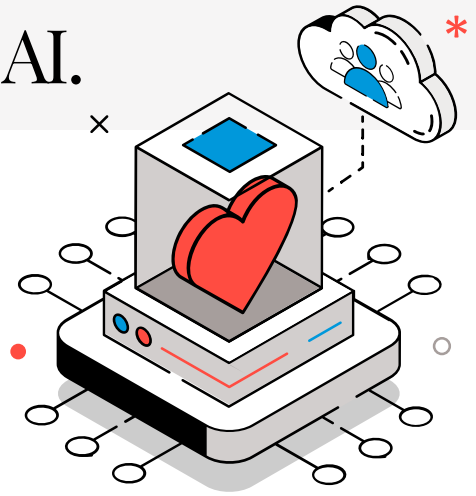
Welcome to the Age of Agentic AI.

How can we help you?

That is the persistent question in a world of AI agents ready to execute tasks at extraordinary speed. For those of us proudly in the business of people, another question matters just as much:

[How can AI drive measurable workforce efficiencies while protecting the meaning and purpose at the heart of work?](#)

AI adoption is accelerating quickly. McKinsey reported that 88% of organizations worldwide used AI in at least one business function in 2025, up from 78% the year prior. The shift from experimentation to expectation is already underway. In 2026 and beyond, AI agents will be embedded into employment journeys, workforce processes, and the systems that connect people to jobs.



Speed Is Not the Point

In staffing, we know how quickly time can slip away in the hiring process. A significant portion of a recruiter's week is consumed by administrative steps. Screening logistics, interview scheduling, reminders, status updates, and compliance follow-ups. This is necessary work, but not relationship-building work.

When AI agents automate those repetitive, time-intensive steps, they do not remove the human element, or what Staffmark likes to think of as "heart." They create more space for it.

“For our customers with large-scale workforce needs, AI creates a way to respond 24x7 to candidates, keeping them informed and connected, but the greater impact is what AI unlocks for Staffmark recruiters and delivery teams. When administrative tasks and routine communications are automated, our teams have more time to advise hiring managers, understand and adapt to workforce trends, and coach candidates toward roles where they will succeed. Our focus skyrockets, as does the value we bring.”

– KAREN WALDROP, STAFFMARK SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT OF SPECIALTY SOLUTIONS



In this view, AI is not simply an acceleration tool. It is a system for creating space to elevate workforce solutions and the talent experience, strengthen human connections, and keep heart at the center of workplace success.

Where AI and Workforce Performance Converge

In staffing and workforce management, the cost of losing the human touch is measurable. It shows up in longer time-to-fill, weaker engagement, and declining retention. When trust erodes, candidate commitment follows. No-shows increase. Early churn rises. Recruiting demand compounds.

Speed without real connection may seem efficient at first, but it eventually slows everything down.

At Staffmark, we are seeing measurable impact when AI is implemented with intention and heart. By deploying AI across screening and scheduling workflows, we are shaving four days off our average time-to-hire. We are targeting an increase in recruiter productivity from 14.3 to 18.5 interviews per week. At roughly 10 minutes per interview, this equates to approximately 60 hours per recruiter per year returned to higher-value human engagement.

By the end of 2026, our goal is to free up 30% of recruiter capacity through AI-driven screening and scheduling support. That capacity is not about simply increasing activity. It is about improving the quality of every placement, strengthening candidate and hiring manager relationships, and driving better long-term workforce outcomes.



3 PITFALLS OF SPEED-CENTRIC AI

AI agents accelerate screening, scheduling, and communication. But when speed outpaces intention, hiring outcomes suffer. Here are a few of the risks and how to avoid them:

AUTOMATING AWAY THE HUMAN WELCOME

Early tenure is fragile. Half of hourly workers leave within four months, according to the SHRM Foundation. Transactional first days increase no-shows and early churn.

The Fix: Pair AI-enabled speed with manager presence, clear expectations, and human reinforcement.



LETTING ALGORITHMS REPLACE JUDGMENT

AI can improve match quality, but without oversight it can amplify bias, increase compliance risk, and weaken long-term fit.

The Fix: Use AI as decision support, not the decision-maker.



OPTIMIZING FOR THROUGHPUT OVER ENGAGEMENT

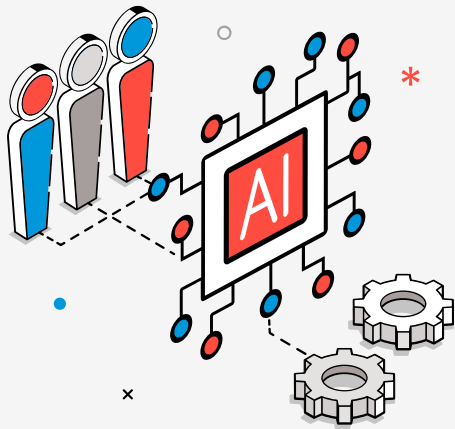
Gallup finds engaged teams deliver 17% higher productivity. Engagement is built through clarity and connection, not faster notifications.

The Fix: Pair automation with intentional human moments that reinforce belonging and performance.



Immediacy Still **Requires Heart**

Candidates want speed, and as employers we strive to meet that expectation. But high-speed hiring automation does not create trust, relationships, or belonging. Staffmark Executive Vice President, Barbara Simmers, has shared stories from staffing's front lines that illustrate where automation can go right or wrong, including this moment she shared with an audience at Shift Work Summit 2025:



“A warehouse worker arrived for a night shift he had accepted through a client app. No one greeted him. No one explained the work. A supervisor simply pointed and said, ‘You are over there.’ Later, the worker reflected, ‘I felt like a barcode that could walk.’”

– **BARBARA SIMMER**,
Staffmark Executive Vice President

The role was filled. The system functioned. The metrics reflected success. But the human experience failed.

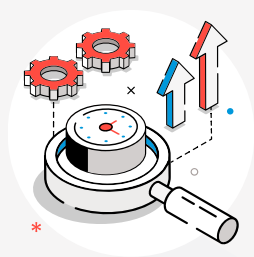
It does not have to be this way. The more digitized and automated our systems become, the more intentional we must be about preserving connection. When workers begin to feel like barcodes, that is not a failure of technology. It is a failure of design.



The Opportunity: **Design for Trust in the Agentic Era**

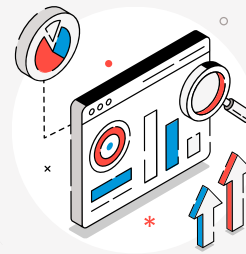
At Staffmark Group, we believe agentic AI must do more than move faster and process more data. It must strengthen the human moments that define the employment experience. AI agents are not replacements for recruiters. When deployed intentionally, they expand capacity so recruiters can apply judgment, deepen relationships, and improve workforce outcomes.

Based on what we see across large-scale workforce programs, we offer the following guidance for employers scaling AI:

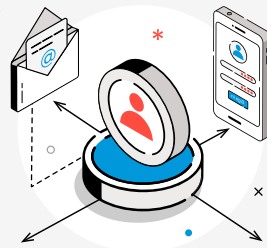


Define success beyond speed. In our experience, time-to-fill, retention, engagement, and productivity must improve together for AI to deliver real value.

Design for the human moment as deliberately as the digital one. Candidates remember how they were treated long after they forget how quickly a notification arrived.



Measure what happens after placement. If trust declines, churn rises, or no-shows increase, it is a signal to recalibrate.



Use AI to expand recruiter capacity, not distance recruiters from talent. When administrative work decreases, relationship depth should increase.



The organizations that win in the agentic era will be those that build trust at scale and use technology to strengthen what makes work work. Be sure to check out Part 2 of this series in which our head of Digital Technology and Transformation, Radi Jaarsma joins me to share how Staffmark defines and assigns AI agents with clear roles, guardrails, accountability, and measurable workforce impact.

Explore **AI + Heart at Staffmark**

Staffmark combines agentic AI with experienced recruiters to deliver faster hiring, stronger retention, increased capacity, and measurable workforce performance. To learn how we're doing it while remaining the heart between people and jobs, visit www.staffmark.com or reach out to our team directly.