

Close It Summit Announces Inaugural 2026 SHIFT Legacy Award Honorees

Selected Leaders recognized for decades of impact, shaping the future of work and workforce systems.

SANTA FE, NM, UNITED STATES, May 21, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- At the 2026 [Close It Summit](#) held May 3-5, 2026, national leaders in workforce innovation, education, and economic mobility gathered to honor the recipients of the SHIFT Legacy Awards, recognizing individuals whose careers have fundamentally shaped the modern workforce and talent ecosystem.

The SHIFT Legacy Award celebrates leaders with more than two decades of impact who have driven systemic change through innovation, policy, education, and unwavering commitment to expanding access to opportunity. This year's honorees collectively represent more than 250 years of service to advancing equitable pathways to work, learning, and economic mobility. "The SHIFT Legacy Award honors the individuals who didn't just participate in this field — they built it," said Jamai Blivin, Founder and CEO of [Innovate+Educate](#) and creator of the Close It Summit. "At a time when the future of work is being rewritten in real time, these leaders remind us that lasting change comes from decades of persistence, innovation, and an unwavering belief that talent exists everywhere. These honorees did not wait for the shift — they were the shift."



Marcos Martinez accepting the SHIFT Legacy Award on May 5, 2026

Top Ten Honorees for the 2026 SHIFT Legacy Award

E. Clarke Porter — A pioneer in global credentialing systems and skills verification infrastructure, Founder of Pearson VUE and Credly. In 2017, the Minneapolis Saint Paul Business Journal named him a Titan of Technology for his 40+ years of work.

Ron Painter — Transformational leader in workforce policy and sector partnerships, President and CEO of NAWB.org for fourteen years, leader in the WIOA legislation.

Kathy Mannes — Architect of large-scale workforce partnerships and national initiatives. Kathy has 50 years of impact, working with Jobs for the Future she mobilized many employers to innovate their workforce strategies.

Dr. Marie Cini — Champion for adult learners and prior learning recognition at a global scale. Dr. Cini was President of the Council for Adults and Experiential Learning and now serves as Provost and Chief Academic Officer at the University of the People.

Michelle Cirocco — A Leader in second-chance employment and justice-impacted workforce transformation. From incarceration in the 1990s to joining Televerde's corporate office, she now holds an MBA from ASU and has been inducted into the W. P. Carey Alumni Hall of Fame. She is now CEO of the Televerde Foundation.

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Jamai Blivin, Founder and CEO of Innovate+Educate

Plinio Ayala — Founder and CEO of Per Scholas and national leader in technology workforce training. As CEO of Per Scholas since 2003, the organization has grown from a single local program to 24 cities and more than 35,000 graduates in technology careers.

Dr. Appu Kuttan — Global innovator in technology training and digital access, providing a large foundation for grants for learning. NEF, through its collaboration with Skillsoft, has distributed over one million individualized courses in

29 languages, with a 92 percent certification exam pass rate.

Marcos Martinez — A longstanding public servant advancing workforce systems in New Mexico for over 35 years. Marcos is currently the deputy secretary of the New Mexico Department of Workforce Solutions. He has given back to New Mexico over and over (under 5 governors and 8 secretaries of labor), sharing his knowledge, commitment, and passion for others.

Geoffrey Roche — Leader in healthcare workforce strategy and leadership development. Currently Sr. VP of Healthcare Solutions at Risepoint, he has led with collaboration, integrity, and a passion for healthcare, while creating environments where people feel trusted, valued, and clear about their purpose.

Laurie Larrea — National workforce leader and architect of regional talent systems. Laurie has



been in the workforce for forty-eight years and served as President and CEO of Workforce Solutions Great Dallas for more than 30 years. Her teams have recognized her most for the people she has developed, and she continues to do so in the workforce space.

"I'm deeply honored to receive the SHIFT Legacy Award and proud that this recognition reflects the work of the entire Per Scholas community, our learners, staff, partners, and employers," said Plinio Ayala, Founder and CEO of Per Scholas. "This award reinforces our belief that talent is everywhere, and that expanding access to opportunity can transform lives, strengthen communities, and shape the future of work."

"Throughout my career, I've always believed that workforce development is about people first. Behind every job search, every training program, and every service we provide is a family working toward a better future," said Marcos Martinez, NMDWS Deputy Secretary. "I've been fortunate to serve communities across New Mexico for more than 30 years, and that work has reinforced the importance of treating people with respect, building strong partnerships, and never losing sight of why we do this work. I'm deeply honored to receive the SHIFT Legacy Award."



"Thank you to Innovate+Educate and the entire Close-It! Team for including me in the SHIFT Legacy Awards this year. I am truly thankful for my workforce career and the wonderful universe of professionals I've engaged along the journey. My experience has informed me that little matters more than a good job in building a good life and family. Our workforce system is pivotal to everyone who seeks assistance, and continues to motivate me. Being included for this recognition among dear friends like Ron Painter and partners Plinio Ayala and Kathy Mannes is deeply touching."

About the SHIFT Legacy Award

The SHIFT Legacy Award recognizes individuals whose leadership, innovation, and lifelong dedication have reshaped workforce and education systems. Honorees are selected for their sustained contributions to advancing skills-based hiring, expanding access to education and training, and building pathways to economic mobility.

About the Close It Summit

The Close It Summit is a national convening focused on closing gaps between people and opportunity by advancing skills-based hiring, workforce innovation, and equitable access to

education and employment. It occurs annually in May. Save the Date for May 3-5, 2027.

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