

3. Alexandra Levit Explains Why Career Durability Is the Future of Talent Management

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Speaker 1:

You're listening to the HR Bartender Show, a casual place to talk about all things work. Here's where you get practical advice about how to be a better employee, manager, and leader in today's workplace. So grab your favorite beverage, pull up a stool, and join us in the conversation. The bar is always open. Now here's your host Sharlyn Lauby.

Sharlyn Lauby:

Hi, everyone. Thanks for being here. I'm your host, Sharlyn Lauby, author of the blog HR Bartender. Before we get started today, I want to take a moment to thank our founding sponsor, Ultimate Kronos Group, also known as UKG.

Speaker 3:

To be a powerfully productive business, you need powerfully happy people. Two leaders in workforce management and HR have joined forces to become UKG, Ultimate Kronos Group. With comprehensive HR solutions, they'll help you create more meaningful connections within your workforce that will make your people smile. UKG, our purpose is people.

Sharlyn Lauby:

Welcome back everyone. In this first season of HR Bartender, we're talking about the future of work. And with me today is Alexandra Levitt to talk about business skills and the future. Alexandra Levitt's goal is to prepare organizations and their employees to be relevant in the future business world. She's a former syndicated columnist for the Wall Street Journal and the author of several books, including the international bestseller, *They Don't Teach Corporate In College and Humanity Works*, *Merging People in Technologies for the Workforce of the Future*. Alex is regularly featured on news outlets, such as CNN, ABC News and NPR. She was named an American management association top leader for two years in a row and has been Money Magazine's online career expert of the year. I am so delighted to have my friend Alexandra here with us today.

Sharlyn Lauby:

So Alex, I have to start out by saying the last time you and I saw each other, we were sitting having drinks and talking about the future. And neither one of us saw this as being the next time we were going to see one another. So tell me, how are you, how is your family, how are you adjusting to the new normal?

Alexandra Levitt:

Well, Sharlyn, it's great to see you, even if we're seeing each other virtually, because normally we would have hit up a conference by this point and had more drinks and talked more about the future in person. But this is the way that we do things now, at least for the time being and I'm doing well. I think this has given me an opportunity to practice what I preach in terms of agility, because this is what I've been talking about in my work for the past decade, that the need to be

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able to pivot according to marketplace demands, the ability to acquire a broad base of skills that you can use in a variety of different situations.

Alexandra Levitt:

And when, understandably as consultants, a lot of my income dropped at the beginning of the year because I couldn't do in-person speaking engagements and there were several things like conferences that did not happen. And so I needed to find some other stuff to do. And that's what I've been working, on a lot more online and written thought leadership, a lot more research, a lot more consultation. And I'm just very fortunate that all of that can be done remotely. And I feel pretty good about it. I mean, I would say as good as it's possible to feel during this time. There's a lot of, of course, everyone is feeling a lot of anxiety, a lot of burnout, but being able to feel like you have some control over your life and in an unpredictable situation like this, I think is very important and we can all do that by increasing our own ability to be agile. So that's what I've been working on.

Sharlyn Lauby:

I think you are so right. We're all trying to find a way to deal with what's happening around us and businesses are no different. They're always growing and evolving and changing, but obviously 2020 is different. When you think back on this year and what's been going on, I'm curious to know, at what point did you realize that organizations were going to radically have to change the way that they do business?

Alexandra Levitt:

I would say it was pretty early on. I mean, I was tracking this pandemic back in January when it was really hitting China and I knew it was inevitable, and most people did I think, that it would be coming here to the US and that it was going to be kind of a long haul. And I just had been in simulations before, scenario planning around pandemics. And I learned back then when I did those simulations, that this is a very, very long process. And so as soon as this came to pass and we realized that it was going to be difficult to contain, I think I realized that organizations were going to need to change the way that they worked, because this is not something that would be a couple of weeks or a couple of months crisis. It's going to go on quite a bit.

Alexandra Levitt:

And it's actually started to embed itself into the culture. So even if we were to have a vaccine or we were to get past this immediate disruption, do people want to, are people willing to go back to the old ways, have organizations finally realized, because you and I, Sharlyn, have been talking for years about the fact that it doesn't make a lot of sense to have people working in person 24/7 to have these giant commercial office spaces in big, expensive cities and require people to somehow get there and be there for a certain number of hours with the technology we have available to us. That's not necessary. And so we've been talking about this transformation for a long time, and I think a lot organizations still would have dragged their feet on it until it became absolutely impossible, which is what the pandemic did.

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Alexandra Levitt:

But the advantage of that is that now organizations are seeing, "Okay, well, the sky will not fall if we work in this new way. It's not perfect. Neither was the other way, but we are able to maintain our productivity, our worker satisfaction and engagement. We are able to do business in new ways, forming partnerships, have come up with new products and services. It's not in most cases, the end of the world." And so I think that's actually a promising development. It's not necessarily that things have changed. I just think that the future work trends that we were seeing before have accelerated, but I don't necessarily think we, we weren't on this path already. And I don't know. Maybe people derive some comfort from that. Personally, I do. It's like, well, we were going in this direction anyway.

Sharlyn Lauby:

It's interesting that you were talking about remote work because, like you, I've seen this trend towards remote work. But I think a lot of organizations spent huge sums of money building gorgeous office space. And it's beautiful. I would love to go in there every day, but come around February, March organizations had to make this, some snap decisions and said, "Okay, everybody's going home." Like you, and it's interesting to me to watch what people are doing now. You're seeing a lot of people say, "I don't really need to live in the city anymore. I can live further out. I can buy a house that's maybe a little bit bigger that has a home office and do things like that." So it's interesting to kind of watch conversations in community groups and what people are thinking and how they're moving forward. But you and I both know because we are both people who have worked from home for a long time, that working from home is different.

Alexandra Levitt:

Yes.

Sharlyn Lauby:

And some of the skills that we might need if we're working from home are different. So I know you mentioned this in your book, *Humanity Works*. Let's talk a little bit about upskilling and reskilling. How do you define those in today's current business environment?

Alexandra Levitt:

That's a great question, Sharlyn, because everybody does this slightly differently. I like to refer to upskilling as, you are in your job that you've got in a particular industry in a particular field, and you're gaining additional skills to do that job more efficiently to do it better. Reskilling on the other hand is, for whatever reason, your job no longer exists, and you are learning something completely new. Now, both of these are necessary because, and it mainly has to do with the rise of automation and machine learning. The fact is we are inserting a lot of technology now into traditionally human driven processes. And so that technology is taking over a lot of the administrative functions, but that requires human beings to continue to add value or figure out a

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way that they can contribute and use our unique skills as humans to really drive the process forward in a way that's far more strategic and add value in a place that the machines can't.

Alexandra Levitt:

And so upskilling would be you're staying in that job, but now you're learning the things that maybe you were focused on the administrative side or the practical, the routine side of things and now you need to learn to be more strategic. And when we talk about the frontline workforce a lot, this is a great example. In the retail space. Well, maybe you just needed to know how to operate a cash register before, maybe you just needed to watch people coming in the door. Well, now you've got cameras and machines that can handle some of those things. You need to learn to be more of a customer advocate. You need to learn how to sell more actively and in a more personalized manner. Well, those are skills that the retail employee didn't need previously. So that's an example of upskilling. We have to help them be retail associates, better in a way that leverages their human skills.

Alexandra Levitt:

Now, reskilling is you were putting the cogs on the assembly line, in a factory, and now there's going to be a robot doing that. And so your job no longer exists. So if you're going to be gainfully employed, you have to figure out how to do something else. And both of these components make up a concept that I'm actually working on with DeVry University called career durability, which means that regardless of what happens in your particular field, that you have kind of a broad set of skills that will enable you to go do something else and to maintain gainful and continuous employment, where you're not going to have these spaces like Wall-E where you're sitting on the couch, eating Doritos, because you've been, skilled out of a job by a machine that you're able to pivot in a way that enables you to be financially secure. And we call that career durability. And it has a variety of components, but upskilling and reskilling are critical parts of that to make sure that the people do find themselves able to support themselves over the longterm.

Sharlyn Lauby:

Now, I don't want you to have to give away any trade secrets or anything like that. Are you able to talk about some of the types of skills you're talking about career durability, are you able to talk about some of the types of skills that people might want to think about?

Alexandra Levitt:

Sure. Well, there are five areas of specifically. Most people are familiar with hard skills and soft skills. So hard skills are, for example, you're a phlebotomist in a hospital, you know how to insert an IV so that the person getting the shot doesn't scream. That's a hard skill. You either know how to insert an IV, or you don't. A soft skill is something that enables you to work interpersonally more effectively with those around you. And those are the skills that make us uniquely human, things like interpersonal and being able to have empathy and creativity. And regardless of the job that you're doing how to leverage the motivations of other people so that

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those are examples of soft skills. So we, of course, you and I, Sharlyn, talk about those all the time.

Alexandra Levitt:

Another area is something that you and I have talked about one-on-one, I'm not sure we've ever talked about it on a podcast, but applied technology skills is an area that I've been investigating for a couple of years. And essentially, that just means that you need to know what technology is available, both software, hardware to do your job more efficiently. It's not that you need to know how to code per se. You don't need to know how to build an application from scratch, but you do need to know that that technology is available so that you can take full advantage of it to do your job. So that's having applied technology skills and regardless of what role you have in what industry, it doesn't matter. Everyone needs to have the applied technology skills for their particular area.

Alexandra Levitt:

And the other two areas are a little bit more general. One is institutional knowledge. So understanding how things work in your organization and in your field. And this is increasingly valuable because even as many things change very often, some things stay the same. And so there is value to being able to look back at past experiences and say, "We did it this way, and this is what worked," or "We had to throw a bunch of things against the wall and seven out of eight fell down, but this one stuck." And so this is the approach we might want to think about taking, being able to explain to other people who might be new, "This is the reason that we want to take this direction because our culture dictates that this will probably work better." That's institutional knowledge. And it's very, very valuable. And with the baby boomers retiring, finally, we have a lot of that institutional knowledge going away. There's a brain drain, so having that is really valuable.

Alexandra Levitt:

And then the final area of career durability is having a growth orientation. So this goes back to what I was talking about regarding agility, that you have to be out of that mindset, where you got a degree, you learned your field, you're done. Maybe you do some professional development here and there, but basically you're done. That's not going to be anyone's career over the next 10 to 15 years. I mean, people are going to have to pivot multiple times. So being open to tapping new areas, to acquire skills, seeing, "Okay, well maybe I don't need to go back for a four-year degree. Maybe I can do an online program, or maybe I can do a job shadow." Really tapping into what we call rivers of information. And one of my colleagues, Scott [Kolozosky 00:14:24] coined that term. And it just means that everyone's got a variety of ways they can learn, but being willing to create your own mix, to curate that the technology, the resources, the education that you need in order to pivot in a way that makes sense for you and makes sense for the industry and role that you're in.

Alexandra Levitt:

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So those are the five components. And I think most people recognize the necessity of giving them some focus, especially in an unpredictable time like this. But I think it can't hurt to realize no matter what job you're in, this is going to be something if you want to be employed, that you're going to have to take ownership of. It's not something that accompany that you might be employed with for two years is responsible for. It's everyone needs to be responsible for themselves, and of course, companies can help. And there are definitely things that they can do to help with career durability in their workforces. But at the end of the day, it really is the ... the onus is on the employee.

Sharlyn Lauby:

Let's talk a little bit though about what companies can do to be a part of this. How can things like upskilling, reskilling, career durability, how can organizations use that right now to help themselves during the pandemic? A lot of organizations are hanging on by a thread. How can they use this?

Alexandra Levitt:

That's a great question. First of all, I'm going back to the business case for this one thing that was interesting is, and this is the reason that I'm working with DeVry coming up with a solution because DeVry did some research around Labor Day that showed that the majority of American workers feel that based on their employers' behavior during the pandemic, that they're disposable, that they're not necessary, that they could be easily replaced by somebody else. And this isn't a good place for either individuals or organizations to be in, because individuals are going to feel like they're not appreciated. They're going to want to leave as soon as they have a better opportunity, they're not going to be loyal. And from an employer perspective, it's not good for business for your employees to not want to do their best and not worry about being productive, especially at home, because they feel like you could take or leave them.

Alexandra Levitt:

So it's not a good situation. And so career durability is a way to do the thing that's right for the organization, but also is right for the individual. The solutions really do cater to both. So I think one way that organizations can address this, and in fact, the organizations that have been the most resilient during the pandemic have really leveraged effectively internal talent pools. So basically you'll have people who are prescribed to do a particular job, but just because they're doing a job and using a certain skillset doesn't mean that they don't have other skills that they could potentially use in other areas of the organization. So you might have an area of the organization that is really slowed down, or maybe it's even no longer viable, but you might have other parts of the organization that are operating like gangbusters and need people yesterday.

Alexandra Levitt:

So what's to say you can't move people from one area into another what's to say you can't provide the training and the technology to kind of upskill or reskill people really quickly to move them into something else. And I think that that really is a solution for career durability that

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benefits both the employer and the employee. The employee gets to keep their job. They get to maybe face a new challenge or do something interesting and the employer can avoid layoffs and also get critically pipelined talent into those roles where they needed somebody yesterday. So I think that's one example that I think is relatively easy to implement, especially with internal job boards and having technology available to see where the needs in the business are and how you can efficiently move people.

Sharlyn Lauby:

One of the things that I remember in my career is when you bring these things up and they're very logical. This is a great ... I get the, "Hey, look, my business is in the toilet. We don't know whether or not we're going to be open next year." Are there opportunities to do some of reskilling, upskilling with \$0?

Alexandra Levitt:

I think there's a ton of ways to do that.

Sharlyn Lauby:

The first thing I think of, is a MOOC. A massive-

Alexandra Levitt:

Yes, of course.

Sharlyn Lauby:

... online course. And if you want the employee to get a certificate, I think 99% of the time you can do it for like \$49.

Alexandra Levitt:

Yes.

Sharlyn Lauby:

But are there others?

Alexandra Levitt:

Yeah. I mean, I think there are a ton of opportunities to learn that don't require money. And I think one of the mistakes organizations make is thinking A, that they need to produce some really complex in-person offering that they need to have an expensive rotational program, where they have people going into a role for three to six months and they're coming from another country. And that is really daunting if you think about it. And those things are very expensive. So instead think of it from an entrepreneurial perspective. If you were an entrepreneur and you were starting a business from scratch and you needed to do certain things, well, you would bootstrap. You would do things on a shoe string, and that's what organizations have to do with

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learning now. And I think that the benefit is there's tons of resources out there that don't require a lot, a large amount of finances.

Alexandra Levitt:

And there are, of course, the massive open online courses that you mentioned, but there's also a variety of courses that aren't massive, that are just produced by ... LinkedIn is another one where people are accessing those offerings and they're free and you can really learn a lot. Some of them are more involved than others. Some of them are longer. Some of them are shorter, but what you can do is you identify a skillset that you need to acquire. And if you're an employer, you can help employees do this. And then you can be an assistant in kind of curating the resources that are out there. Because I do think one of the pitfalls of this approach is that people don't necessarily know what reliable information is. Obviously, if you take a MOOC from Stanford, you know it's going to be pretty reliable, but what if you find something on LinkedIn that an influencer developed, how do you know that that's trustworthy? How do you know that it's in line with the messages that your business is trying to get across?

Alexandra Levitt:

And the answer is you as an employee might not know that. So as the employer, as human resources professionals, as learning professionals, our job is to help people find the right path to resources that work for them and work for us. And I think that's something where we don't have a lot of experience, because again, learning has traditionally been, "We're going to spend a lot of money and develop a course on our own. We're going to reinvent the wheel and do our own version of whatever it is. We're going to have it in-person so we can control what people are learning and what they're consuming." And this model is increasingly not working. A, it's expensive, but B, it's not even feasible because of the current situation. So being able to shepherd people in the direction of appropriate learning, I think is a critical competency now of the learning professional that didn't necessarily exist a year ago.

Sharlyn Lauby:

And that kind of leads us to our wrap up. We've been spending our time talking about a lot of things that organizations can do to upskill and reskill and support employees. Is there something that the employee should be thinking about doing so as we talk about we're going into the final quarter of the year, I have a tendency to think about goals this time of year. I'm probably not alone, but what can employees do to set their career up for success going into next year?

Alexandra Levitt:

The most important thing that employees can do is see the writing on the wall. This is an area where I think we, as human beings could get a lot better. We are far, far too reactive to circumstances, and we work ourselves up into a frenzy and we're stressed out and we're burned out because things that we kind of could have anticipated are happening, but we sort of refuse to believe they are happening. So I think the number one thing people can do is be proactive. Read a lot about your industry, read about your company, but also other companies in the



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space. Do you see consolidation? Do you see strategic automation happening in an area that affects you? Where are areas where there is opportunity, where they're looking for people to ... And one of the areas that's extremely hot now is being the liaison between the human and the machine labor.

Alexandra Levitt:

Well, those are jobs that in most organizations and most roles don't exist yet, but they're going to need to. So can you learn enough about machine learning to be an advocate for those processes and explain them to human decision makers? I mean, this is just one example. But looking for ways to be able to continuously add value in your organization, and then once you identify what those opportunities are, then you want to identify the skills that you're going to need, where there might currently be a gap and in the area of technology, well, maybe you don't actually understand how automation works. Maybe you don't understand now how the applications and the algorithms work together in order to come up with a decision. Maybe you don't understand how data is collected, how it's analyzed, how it's synthesized, and then how the insights are derived from it. Well, these might be some good areas to investigate, depending on your role.

Alexandra Levitt:

And again, going back to where you get these resources. Well, there are so many courses. I remember a few years ago, I wanted to be able to talk just very cursorily about data analytics. I didn't know what it even was. So I wanted to be able to have a core, basic understanding. And so I took a free course from one of the technology companies, just like they were just offering it online and I took it and I learned enough. Am I an expert? No. But I could talk intelligently about it, which was all I really needed. And so that's the other thing people want to do is determine what does the focus need to actually be. You don't want to be all over the place with your learning because nothing will stick. So where do you need to dive deep? And where will just a broad-based, kind of basic understanding serve you best?

Sharlyn Lauby:

Well, I have to say, I think we've really spent a lot of time talking about learning and how learning is going to be the key to success. Not just today, not just next year, but in the future. You and I have talked many times about there will be another challenge.

Alexandra Levitt:

Yes, there will.

Sharlyn Lauby:

There will. There will be another challenge and that learning can be that answer to get us through our challenges. So I just want to extend a huge thanks to you for being here again, Alexandra Levitt, author of *Humanity Works*. If you want to connect with her, and I know you do,

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we will put her contact information in the show notes so that you can find her on all the social outlets. So Alex, thank you so much. And I look forward to seeing you in person soon.

Alexandra Levitt:

Likewise. Thanks so much for having me, Sharlyn. And I hope everyone enjoys the podcast. It's going to be great.

Sharlyn Lauby:

Thank you. That was a really great conversation. I hope you enjoyed it as much as I did, but don't go away just yet. In a moment I'd like to share with you my takeaways from the discussion that we just had.

Speaker 3:

To be a powerfully productive business, you need powerfully happy people. Two leaders in workforce management and HR have joined forces to become UKG, Ultimate Kronos Group. UKG creates comprehensive HR solutions designed to make employees happier and build more meaningful connections within your workforce. They've even done that for themselves. Being recognized as one of the top places to work and UKG's 12,000 employees help thousands of businesses build better cultures every day. When you're ready to make your people happier, UKG is ready to work for you. UKG. Our purpose is people.

Sharlyn Lauby:

I hope you enjoyed this with Alex Levitt as much as I did. I thought that the connection between agility and learning was just so incredibly important. We are constantly going to be faced with new things to deal with. It could be in our personal or professional lives. It could be something that we were looking forward to like a promotion or a relocation or something that maybe we had no idea, which has pretty much been all of 2020. Nothing was on my bingo card. So being able to adapt to what's going on around us is just necessary.

Sharlyn Lauby:

And the way we learn how to get better at it is through learning, understanding how we like to learn, understanding those things that we need to learn and being able to put those pieces together to help us maneuver the future. I will say, if you enjoyed the conversation that I had with Alex and I hope you did check out a couple of other conversations. My conversation with Hannah Morgan, talking about career development and the conversation with Chris Mullin talking about technology could be very nice pieces to bringing all of this together. So again, thank you for being here on the HR Bartender Show. And I look forward to seeing you next time.

Speaker 1:

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