

2. *Chris Mullen Shares Why Employees Are Not Going to Work for Companies with Outdated Technology*
Transcription

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. 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 1:

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. In this first season of the HR Bartender Show we're talking about the future of work. And with me today is Chris Mullen to talk about technology and the future. Chris is the executive director of the Workforce Institute and strategic advisor at Ultimate Kronos Group, also known as UKG. Chris assists clients with their human resources strategies, and prior to joining UKG, he was the Director of Human Resources at the University of Colorado in Boulder. Chris has earned his Senior Professional in Human Resources certification from the HR Certification Institute. And he's a Senior Certified Professional from the Society for Human Resource Management, also known as SHRM. He has a PhD in Higher Education and Leadership with a research on how mobile technology impacts work-life negotiation. Chris, thanks so much for being here today. It's been a while since you and I saw each other. I think it might have been last year, maybe in Vegas?

Chris Mullen:

Yes. I'm so excited to be on with you, see somebody, chat with a friend, but yes, wish we could be in person for sure. Oh my goodness.

Sharlyn Lauby:

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Tell me how you are? Tell me how your family is? How are you managing the new normal?

Chris Mullen:

Well, I think to that point a lot of us are missing the relationships that we had with friends from around the country or the world. I mean, we can still get together on video or phone, but it's still not the same as being in a room with someone. I'm doing well. I'm blessed to still have work and a job. I'm blessed to have my health. My family is as well, but it is definitely the new normal has continued to shift on me and the family. Even what was the new normal in April is not the new normal now. You and I had chatted briefly before this, but all my kids were sent home in March and April to do remote learning and it didn't go well. I have four children and at that time it was one in every school, high school, middle school, elementary and preschool.

Chris Mullen:

Preschooler it's hard because she's four. How is she supposed to operate a computer? My elementary school, she had an iPad to work off of and it was very difficult to do her schoolwork. The older two, they're a little bit more self-sufficient, but it wasn't the same for them from the social aspect. And even now that school's back in session over the summer, they're all home. Even though I work remotely might've have for the last two years, it is still so different for me because I'm trying to help educate the kiddos in the house. My poor wife, who she used to have at least a few hours a day by herself to do her own work, now has everybody home. And so we've been together for so long. I think everyone's like, "Okay, where do I get my own space in the house? What are we doing outside of the family?"

Chris Mullen:

And we really can, and we have talked about even the world is changing. For me, there's a raging wildfire as we're recording this, seven miles from the house in Colorado, these types of things, and there's fires everywhere in the U.S. at the moment, but everything is changing, it's so different. I was giving a presentation last week and the sky was orange, and the ash is raining down. And thank God for the first responders in our hospitals and our first responders on the front lines of the fire. It is not an easy time for them either or us.

Sharlyn Lauby:

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Definitely everything that's going on in the world is challenging us. There was one thing that you were talking about that had to do with technology so while on one hand technology is this thing that's helping us a little bit right now when we all can't be together. One of the things that I heard from companies when people were first starting to shut down and reduce hours and send employees home was, organizations that thought they were very technology rich, they thought that they had a lot of technology and realized we're not as far along as we thought we were where technology was concerned. They thought that they had all the pieces in place and when everybody started going home and trying to be productive, there were some challenges along the way. I was wondering if you had heard the same thing, was that something that I heard or what are companies doing right now with regard to technology?

Chris Mullen:

I think you've spot it on. I was seeing this prior to COVID, I go out and I present at HR Conferences and Leadership Conferences, what I was noticing from the participants was when I was talking about at that time, the future of work where the futurists thought we should be or where we currently were, and I would put up a maturation curve, everyone in the room where these futures thought we were, these thought leaders say we are now, they were like, "I'm not there." I felt the same way as an HR practitioner years ago, is I still feel like we're in the automation phase, even before COVID we were in, how do we automate our manual process? How do we gain more efficiencies? How do we create that margin to be more strategic?

Chris Mullen:

I had seen that firsthand and then when COVID hit that just ratcheted it all up and everyone need to get on board as they possibly could. Because you have whole industries, I mean, I used to be in the public sector at universities, most of them have desktops. They don't have laptops. Even if you wanted to send the folks home, they're not taking their towers and or monitors with them. I'm lucky in some companies, at least they started to give everyone laptops prior so they could actually physically go remotely. But even that changes from a technology standpoint, they may have the hardware which is for instance, this is my life right now. It's difficult for me to do a webinar. First of all, technology wise, I'm tired of the webinars. I'm tired of the camera's. Just right here I yearned for in-person and standing and presenting.

Chris Mullen:

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You're recognizing, do I have the bandwidth in my house? And I told everyone how many people are in my house. I don't have the bandwidth. I have to actually go to my kids and say, "You need to shut off all your video. Tell your teachers your dad's got to give a presentation and that's why you're not on." Because otherwise the video starts to drag and it doesn't work when you're presenting around the country or around the world. I agree with you in that companies because of the pandemic are being made to get on board with the technology. While they may have thought that they were there, no one was ready for this.

Sharlyn Lauby:

I think that the piece to add to that is it's not like on December 31st, this is going to be over. A lot of organizations are thinking ahead and saying, "We believe that employees are going to work from home or work remotely in some way or only come into the office one or two days a week for the majority of next year."

Chris Mullen:

I would concur with that as well, because even if we could bring everyone back to the office which is a huge if, I don't know that employees are going to feel comfortable to come back to the office full-time. I think we have to be intentional as a company, whatever company you work for, you have to be intentional about bringing folks back, what's their comfort level? We don't know behind the employee what's happening at home. Maybe they have someone who is at higher risk. And so they don't feel as comfortable coming into the office and interacting with folks. Maybe they've gotten used to working from home and are way more productive. I also see the opposite that people aren't as productive as home. I know many people who yearn to go back to the office to have these types of interactions, because that's their creative space with their colleagues.

Chris Mullen:

A lot of like you said, my research is on work-life negotiation like, they yearn for the hard boundary of home and work because at home they're not getting it. Technology can help us and help support each of these ways to go about it, from a company standpoint. I firmly believe it's not going to be the same next year. We're not getting back to the old normal. It may be an iteration of what we're doing now. From a technology standpoint I always thought this, but I think of it more now that we're almost like an app on our phones constantly being updated and there's a constant iteration. What's the next

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update? How do we get closer to being where we want to be, but we're not going to be everyone in the office full-time next year. I don't think so.

Sharlyn Lauby:

I want to take your update comment one step further. If an organization right now is recognizing, "Hey, we need to step up our technology game." Where should they start? How do I figure that out?

Chris Mullen:

That's a great question. I think a good place to start with any large scale project is having a clear idea of the ultimate goal. Now that we've been in the situation we've been in for months, six months, seven months now, looking forward as a company I would ask, what is our ultimate goal? Where do we want to be? Knowing that this could continue. For instance, if you know your goal is to gain better insight into either the workforce or you want a clean information so that you can make better decisions through your technology. And this could be either for employees or customers so we're talking about both here, then your clear next step is to evaluate technology. What do you currently have? What does it currently do? And what do you really need? And who can provide that?

Chris Mullen:

Some of the research that the Workforce Institute puts out, which you're a valued board member of. We heard that through our research, that those who adopted the new technology from the pandemic, 60% hope that their organization keeps many of the technology and policy changes in place. From our respondents that's what we're hearing, but that leaves 40% that believe that their organization will roll back the changes that were made. I don't know about you, but I've actually had this happen to me in the workplace, not right now, but at a previous role where I was working from home a day a week, because the commute was so long and I had that role back on me. No legitimate reason as an HR practitioner my first question is, what part of my job that am I not doing? And I heard, "Oh my God, you're way even more efficient when you're not here than you are here because you don't have the meeting's bugging you down."

Chris Mullen:

And it was a leadership change because they had a different philosophy. And so I do think employees are worried that this could be rolled back. Companies need to think about that with their technology. How do they continue to support that remote, that... I

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think it's more about flexibility, the flexibility of it. My advice to leaders is to not mistake the change that they made for COVID as like real digital transformation. We're really trying to put a band-aid on what was happening and that's no one's fault, no one saw this coming. But with that, we must embrace the technology that have been adopted to remedy like the many challenges that the pandemic brought on, that they weren't chosen in haste. We still chose them for a reason, and we should figure out what those reasons were and enhance or magnify them. We have to look at the totality of the organization, the technology usage, and then what's the path forward really from a company standpoint. That's your step by step approach to this.

Sharlyn Lauby:

As you're talking about the totality of the organization, one of the things that always comes into play is money. Some organizations have funds that they can strategically use to better their technology. But a lot of organizations, if I play my harshest critic, a lot of organizations might come back and say, "Hey look, I've got budgets constraints, I'm trying to keep payroll." Based on your research, the Workforce Institute does research, UKG is famous for doing a lot of research. If companies could only invest in a couple of things to improve their workplace technologies, make employees more productive, where should they start looking? Where should they start investigating?

Chris Mullen:

Our recent research backs up your statement where we had, I think it was one third said, budget constraints was the biggest challenge when you were trying to implement new technology. And it's something that I went through when I was looking as a practitioner to purchase technology. One way I went about it and I've seen it done multiple times is knowing the ROI and the value it adds, what the technology adds and it's an investment. We have to think about it that way. It's an investment. What does it replace that adds the value? For instance, when I implemented HR technology a few years ago, it actually saved two FTEs. Now that doesn't mean I got rid of those two FTEs. I wanted to repurpose the people and free them up. So I did that, but there's certainly ways you can look at the ROI.

Chris Mullen:

I would suggest choosing the workplace technology that will assist and empower your employees the most. What is the biggest bang for your buck if you will? When you're looking at that in conjunction with the budget constraints, are there administrative tasks that can be automated that maybe bug your managers down or your employees down?

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I mean, it's easy for me to say scheduling and attendance. That's one of the biggest ROI where you can gain your biggest bang for your buck. We've seen with the pandemic a lot more self-service technology being put in place where companies that I would say pre-pandemic they didn't give their employees that type of self-service, but now they are. And that has saved them some administrative and it has saved them some budget and money.

Chris Mullen:

I think that has been shifting in the workplace as well and their personal life it gets communicated to managers to propose a best fit schedule. Maybe we can do something around scheduling too and preferences because we know that there's a lot of companies and businesses that aren't operating at 100%. A, be shifting, they're doing different things and maybe technology can help there as well. I can't imagine what the workload would look like for a manager trying to schedule during the pandemic if you're trying to do it manually.

Sharlyn Lauby:

I can't even imagine what that would be like. What was interesting is you were talking about how technology can save head count. And I know that that is often the first place that people might go when it comes to, "Hey, if I bring this piece of technology and I can say if save two FTEs, and I know I've been in this position too as a practitioner, how do we help the organization realize it's not always about cutting head count. It's about as you put it, repurposing headcount to do things that bring more value to the organization. Those things that right now, at least for the foreseeable future HR departments need to go out there and do, touching base with employees making sure everybody's okay.

Chris Mullen:

You're right. It's a topic we shouldn't ignore because there's a lot of folks thinking about when you implement technology, then are you saving FTE? What do you do with that FTE? There is some improvements that can be made in many organizations when you free up an FTE. I'm not talking to like, you're freeing up a full person, but maybe you freed up 40% of an HR person's workload through automating administrative tasks and that's exactly what we did. I started to push people out to the employees to go, what are we doing well? What aren't we doing well? Where should we be? What are your needs? And now more than ever, that builds trust. If you're looking to be a great culture, if you want to retain your great talent, or if you want to attract great talent once you start to hire again, then you really need to think about that. And cutting workforce is not the way

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that that won't come off as well. When people are doing referrals or looking at new places to work.

Chris Mullen:

From an HR standpoint, before HR has often looked at as like the soft and fluffy part of the organization and payroll is usually your tactical cost center. But the truth is if it's faster and more efficient hiring practices, then you're getting someone more productive because you're hired them faster. And you're actually reducing overtime because someone's not filling that role because you now have someone in it. We can look at everything like better onboarding, that means less turnover. We know that from an HR standpoint, that if you have a bad onboarding practice, people are more likely to leave in the first 90 days to a year. And when you have employees of longer-tenure, the training shifts from getting them up to speed, it increases the value of that person. I was reading an article the other day, which I thought was super interesting. They talked about the grey-collar employee. That's what I thought too. I saw your face right there and I thought the same thing I said, "Oh, I got to look at this. I got to look..." Yet it's in between the blue-collar and the white-collar.

Chris Mullen:

What companies are doing and a lot of this is happening in the manufacturing, and they're a good example, because they automate it so much they put some people out of work. Because they automated whatever process they were doing. But now they have so much machinery, if it breaks or goes down, they lose thousands upon thousands of dollars every minute that that machine is not producing. So the grey-collar is they've taken some of the blue-collar employees who may have been displaced because of the machinery they've sent them to technical school. And we're not talking a four year degree or two year degree, sometimes it's a year process. They spend some of their week learning about the machinery, how to maintain it, how to fix it and then they spend the other part of their week on the floor maintaining and fixing it.

Chris Mullen:

By maintaining the machinery and it doesn't go down, they are actually saving thousands of dollars for their companies every time. The other piece that was made is they're actually getting paid more than their blue-collar counterparts. There was a whole another piece of this story about college being overly expensive and you may not be making as much money coming out with a four year degree, but these folks were making quite a bit more money within the first, like three to five years, is more of an

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apprenticeship program. Super interesting, but I think that's the example of if we automate their job, how do we move them to something else? Because especially if they're a really great worker, you don't want to lose them.

Sharlyn Lauby:

Well, speaking of you not losing people, here's my last question for you. As we move into 2021, and we're talking about technology and we're talking about how it impacts work and how it impacts people in the organization. If there's one business trend, one thing you see going on right now that organizations need to pay attention to, HR pros need to pay attention to, what do you see that being?

Chris Mullen:

I would also say pre-pandemic and I'll probably say post-pandemic, but it's one that shouldn't be overlooked because of everything going on, and that is HR pros and businesses alike need look at trust as an organizational imperative. To me it's non-negotiable. The trust that you have with your employees, with your customers is foundational, it shouldn't be overlooked. And going into 2021 with whatever changes are coming, we should continue with increasing the trust among employees. For different companies, different businesses, that means different things. Maybe you're lacking communication. Maybe something went awry during the pandemic and you need to course correct. Well, you know what, be vulnerable, be humble and let's correct it with the employees, let's get that trust back. Because 2020 keeps throwing us curve balls and we're not out of it yet. Right now as we record this, we're in October. I'm not sure what the next two and a half months have, but we have a global pandemic. We've got wildfires, major recessions, no politics, we even talked that yet, but that's the stuff that's happening globally from a business perspective.

Chris Mullen:

And then you have the employees and it gets piled, one, because if you're working from home, you may have childcare, eldercare, pets. Our relationships are different with the people we live with than they were before the people we don't live with that we used to see. Schedules are changing. I think it's important for the employer-employee relationship to be built on that solid foundation of trust. This is a really good time to do that. Managers should be checking in with their employees. If you're a manager and you didn't have that relationship before, now's the time to build it. Now's the time to call them and say, "How's it going?" Be empathetic. That's one of the things I've been honing in on now too is this empathetic leadership that is coming about. It's something that

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doesn't come new to me, it's my personality with my teams, but we need to be empathetic towards what's going on in their lives because we see the employee. Do we see the person? And then do we see what's behind the person? There's a lot there to unpack.

Sharlyn Lauby:

You're right, there is. And I think that to wrap up our time together, we can use those technology tools in order to make some of those things happen.

Chris Mullen:

Or at least give you the time to make those happen. Let's automate some of the things that you have that are draining or that are just monotonous, so that then you can have that because many times managers have said, "Oh, I don't have time for that." Well, let's figure out how do we get you that time. What technology, what automation can we put in place so that now you do have time for that. And there's also technology out there that can help remind you of having that relationship. Like what does the one-on-one look like? What is your performance review look like? It shouldn't be once a year. These types of things that have always been aspirational I think for folks, now need to be practical and put into place.

Sharlyn Lauby:

We need to take those lessons that we're learning, lessons that we keep learning and put them into practice.

Chris Mullen:

So that we can humanize work again.

Sharlyn Lauby:

Chris, I want to thank you again for spending some time with us today and sharing your insights and your experience with us. For those of you listening in, if you want to connect with him, you'll find his contact info in the show notes. I know you're going to want to check out his writings and of course, check out the Workforce Institute blog. Thanks again for being here.

Chris Mullen:

Thank you so much.

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Sharlyn Lauby:

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

Speaker 1:

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 UKGs 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:

One of the things that I valued in the conversation with Chris had to do with the conversation about ROI. I think that Chris did a really good job of reminding us that ROI has a couple of different forms. First of all, it's the hard numbers, it's the dollars and cents, but he also pointed out that ROI has a lot to do with people and as business professionals we want to bring those ROI together if you will, and remember that there's a money ROI and a people ROI, and we need to have them both in order to be successful. We can use technology as an opportunity to get both the money ROI and the people ROI in our businesses.

Sharlyn Lauby:

I hope that you enjoyed Chris's conversation with me as much as I did. If you liked this conversation, go back and check out my conversation with Alexandra Levit, because she touches on some of the same concepts that Chris does with the concept of grey-collar. Alex talks about them in terms of up-skilling and re-skilling, and Chris talks about the concept of grey-collar. And so it's interesting to see how those pieces are starting to come together. Thanks again for listening to the HR Bartender Show and I look forward to seeing you next time.

Speaker 1:

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