

Episode 263: The Role of the CHRO Leading Change



Intro: [00:00:00.18] Welcome to the Workology Podcast, a podcast for the disruptive workplace leader. Join host Jessica Miller-Merrell, founder of Workology.com, as she sits down and gets to the bottom of trends, tools and case studies for the business leader, H.R. and recruiting professional who is tired of the status quo. Now, here's Jessica with this episode of Workology.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:00:24.34] Today's podcast is part of the Workology Podcast series, and it's powered by our friends at HUB International. This CHRO series is focused on the roles of the Chief Human Resources Officer or CHRO. The CHRO, also called oftentimes the Chief People Officer, is an executive level role that deals with managing human resources, as well as with organizational development and implementing policies of change to prove the overall efficiency of the company. Today, I'm joined by Deb LaMere. She's the Vice President of H.R. at Datasite. Prior to joining Data Site in 2019, Deb served in several senior employee engagement roles at Ceridian, including Employee Engagement Product Manager for key modules of Ceridian Cloud HRS System and Vice President of Employee Experience and Culture. Prior to that, she was the senior HR consultant at Lawson Software and held several positions at Allina Hospitals and Clinics in Minneapolis. Deb, welcome to the Workology podcast.

Deb LaMere: [00:01:24.99] Hey, thanks for having me, Jessica. Happy to be here.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:01:27.81] I'm so excited to chat with you. I want to talk about your background first, because you have been in human resources for nearly 20 years, and that's, in fact, where you started your career was in H.R.. That's not always the case for a lot of the folks we've been talking to as part of the CHRO series. I wanted to ask you, how did your experience and job titles evolve over time into a VP and see CHRO type position?

Deb LaMere: [00:01:54.36] Great first question to start with. You know, my my background really starts with I actually have a degree in H.R. and even got an a master's in HRIR from the University of Minnesota. So I've always wanted to be an H.R. and take that next step. I've had a variety of roles throughout my career and I wouldn't change a thing with it. I started in an H.R. service center right out of college and that was a great background to everything. It was payroll, was benefits, employee issues, all those pieces that you had and then moved around and being at a line up through their health care organization was fantastic because you were able to move around and have all these different experiences. And I do believe that that's what makes the H.R. leader that I am today is to have been in all these different roles and to work with these different functions. And I would say to I had great champions and mentors, the boss that I had as I moved into my generalist role, she really pushed me to to move into a generalist role and do that. And then the Vice President of Human Resources at the time where I was making a decision whether or not to stay at a line or

move on to Lawson, and she was like, you need to get other experiences, too, which helped push as well. She wasn't pushing me out the door, but it was great to have someone to support you through your career in that.

Deb LaMere: [00:03:09.93] And so, I mean, each of the roles that I've taken have brought these different aspects to my HR career where you had pay and benefits at the beginning and then lost and really brought in this public global organization where I supported and partnered with the general managers for these three different verticals that were there were global supporting sales and services teams and really having that proverbial HR seat at the table, which really prepared me for the roles that I went into at Ceridian as we transition through the places that they were in at that point in time, raising employee engagement, changing the culture that was there, bringing two organizations together and then ultimately leading to that role in product. And finally, where it really came down to the end game has always been to be a CHRO. It's been my goal. It's been my dream. I even remember my college professor at the University of St. Thomas asking, you specifically want to be a Chief H.R. Officer at X Company?

Deb LaMere: [00:04:07.53] And I'm like, yeah, why not? I can do it. So I think being here at data site is like the culmination of all these different experiences that I've had. And I love the fact that everything I've learned and the leaders that I've had in my life and the mentors that have been there have helped shape this experience. And I can bring to Datasite to bring this change and transformation and an amazing experience to to the Datasite team.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:04:33.63] I love how you mentioned not only experience, but also mentors, because that's one thing we haven't talked a lot about in the series, is the importance of having mentors in this variety of HR roles. So I appreciate that.

Deb LaMere: [00:04:49.50] I wouldn't be where I am today without certain key people in my life and whether they were a formal mentor or even an informal mentor at the time. I look back on those pieces in those times and those nuggets of information that I hold on to today and how it has helped me and guided me to be the leader that I am.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:05:08.80] So we've talked about mentorship and the variety of roles that you have worked in. What other skills and experiences do you think are requirements or must haves for that CHRO role? Thinking about HR leaders that are, you know, they're like you, they're like, hey, I want to be a CHRO.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:05:26.23] You know, I think it comes down to you got to be able to deal with ambiguity. You've got to be adaptable, pivot on a moment's notice, I think in H.R., where, you know, you can walk in and it's never the same job day to day. And when you get into that into those higher rankings and into that CHRO role, you really are pivoting quite a bit. And like, as the company pivots, you want to make sure it's not just you individually who's pivoting.

Deb LaMere: [00:05:52.42] You have to prepare and pivot your entire team, be able to make sure there's communication that goes along with that and then listening, I think for a big piece, too, is being is being able to listen and react. That takes some of the emotion out of it then, too. But just it's those pieces of being able to adapt, pivot quickly, listen to what's going on, and then be able to react and that you're really you're there to help guide people through transitions, through difficult situations, but also celebrate some of the amazing times that are out there then too.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:06:24.67] Before we go into some specific questions about Datasite, how big, how many employees it's employee size and then how big is your HR team?

Deb LaMere: [00:06:32.29] Sure, we are a hundred employees globally and I have approximately 15 people on the HR team.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:06:38.83] I mean, yeah, that's a it's a global organization. So not just US based.

Deb LaMere: [00:06:42.61] Yep, exactly. So I've got a pretty large sized team in United Kingdom and then the rest are here in the US.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:06:50.08] Awesome. I want to talk a little bit about covid and how it changed our world of work. Can you talk a little bit about what you're doing to support your employees and maybe how the company has changed since March of last year?

Deb LaMere: [00:07:04.90] Yes, and which is incredible to think it was. It's almost been a year. And I actually would have to say that Datasite we've actually been working on this for a year now because it really started being that that global company, it started in Asia PAC.

Deb LaMere: [00:07:20.50] And we have a large presence in Asia Pacific, particularly in Hong Kong and China. And it was during the Chinese New Year that a lot of this was coming up. And just, you know, we were making some quick decisions about how people work from home. We can do that. We can make it work. If we've got support people in Asia, how do we get them laptops? How do we how do we just pivot and be able to say because nobody knew the duration of how long any of this would be, clearly. But we moved as quickly as possible to be able to get some of these things done as well. So we've started it in January. But really, March was when as an organization, we went completely globally work from home. And the fact that we've had technology resources that we've put into place in the last 18 to 24 months that have helped us really be able to pivot that way. Particularly for our customer service. I think that's something that we were always concerned about. Could we have customer service people work from home even prior to pandemic? And now we can we've proven we can do it.

Deb LaMere: [00:08:17.95] So some of the things that we've put into place is really, you know, understanding what a resources people need. So it's not just the workspace that you have, but it goes into the pieces of the physical wellness, such as virtual workouts. We have a partnership, a class pass, but mental health, mental health is huge. We've got wellness Wednesdays that we've been doing where we share information, virtual meditation classes. We're just continuing to look at a variety of resources. And as this continues to go on, and as we know that lockdown's, it keeps happening as things go on after the holidays, things like that, that lockdown's continue to happen, that mental health piece is huge. And so we're also about ready to launch training for our managers in terms of just understanding mental health and mental wellness for their employees. It's that other really important piece. And in addition, we added something called recharge days this last year. And what was great about recharge days was that it didn't come on your vacation sick or anything like that.

Deb LaMere: [00:09:15.97] It was something where we were cognizant of the fact that employees are, you know, we believe, I believe in a work-like plant where it's, you know, that at times you're going to bring your home into work and you're going to bring your work home. But at some point, all of work went home. And so that work life blend became all mashed into one. So you have parents who are dealing with online schooling, couples that are in households, they are both on conference calls. And we've got employees who have roommates and it's in tiny little apartments in New York City or London. And so we wanted to make sure that they've got time to be able to step away. And that's really what those recharge days where where they could hold their hand up in the air and say, hey, I need a couple hours to myself. I'm going to go do what I need to do and take care of myself, just the mental health, just recharge because we want people to be able to bring their best selves to work. And that's really what those recharge days were there for then as well. So, I mean, a couple of other things that it's done for us, too, is that training, getting tip sheets out to managers on how to work with their employees remotely. But also communication has been key throughout this whole this whole pandemic. And we have done virtual town halls. We're used to doing a quarterly cadence, but we started moving to a monthly cadence in terms of our global town halls. But also then we had many of our departments also really stepped up and created their own town halls on a monthly basis. There have been some really fun ones with many raffles, meat raffles.

Deb LaMere: [00:10:47.95] We've had recently our CFO even dressed up for the holidays and everybody got a really good laugh out of his reindeer, but his reindeer glasses that lit up. So, you know, we've had a lot of fun. And I think it's actually drawn a lot of people closer together, though, as well as we as we connect and try to work through this whole virtual world.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:11:09.04] I love these stories. They're great for the listeners because it's sometimes the littlest thing, like light-up reindeer glasses that make employees feel connected to their their peers, but also senior leadership. So I love that you guys are it's the little things that can really be powerful.

Deb LaMere: [00:11:31.13] Yeah, it's been it's been such a great way. And the other piece behind it is truth is we've looked at it our way of recognition as well. And we implemented a global recognition program that allowed us to even share more of a spotlight on employees and what they're doing. And it's really gotten the senior leadership has been really involved in it and they love it. They're tagging people left and right. And it's a great way to see our company kind of come closer together where I know it's so hard to engage a remote workforce, but it's these little steps. And you're right, it's the rain. It's the reindeer light-up glasses. It's some of these funny things where there's a cheesecake raffle or something like that that just, I think starts to bring

people and brings more realism into it. And just like brings everybody everyone's down to earth. And we all like to have a lot of fun.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:12:22.33] I love it. I love it. It's something good to come out of something that has been so uncertain in such a scary time.

Deb LaMere: [00:12:28.84] Yeah, exactly. Yeah.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:12:30.67] Another question I wanted to ask you is about how you and your team keep up with all the geographic changes. I mean, I know like UK is on lockdown right now. Other countries, there's employment law changes, cultural expectations in different areas. How do you guys keep up with all this stuff?

Deb LaMere: [00:12:50.08] Yeah, you know, I know more about a lot of what's happening geographically. I think, too, because of what's happened with covid. I mean, we partner really well with our in-house counsel and legal team, and then we get connected out to into our other legal partners, external legal partners that are out there as well.

[00:13:10.36] But the team and I spent a lot of time scouring the news, spending a lot of time together. We've had a return to work committee that we've put together where right now it's still more about office updates, improving communications that go out that, you know, just again, it's kind of understanding if there's different levels of lockdowns. And what does that mean and how does that apply to our employees then? So it's it's again, it's a good partnership of legal HRR. Our wonderful folks in the marketing team, like all of us, are partnering together in order to make sure that we're keeping up to date on the information, but also keeping our employees up to date as well.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:13:46.81] You're not the first person to talk about like a return to work committee. I was chatting with another CHRO and they have a specific position who's like the Chief Virtual Officer. And that is what they're focused on, the virtual experience, return to work, how we can make the remote workplace friendlier and make sure that everybody's getting the resources and support that they need.

Deb LaMere: [00:14:09.13] Oh, that's a great idea. I might need to steal that too.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:14:13.48] Yeah, I'll connect you.

Deb LaMere: [00:14:14.38] Fantastic.

Break: [00:14:16.24] Let's take a reset. This is Jessica Miller-Merrell. And you were listening to the Workology podcast sponsored by Workology. We're talking about CHROs and all the roles and responsibilities that they have, the different projects that they're implementing during these crazy covid times, and I'm talking with Deb LaMere. She's the Vice President of Human Resources for Datasite. This podcast is part of our CHRO series on the Workology podcast. It's sponsored by Workology and it's powered by our friends at HUB International.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:14:48.07] I want to talk a little bit about technology selection. As VP of H.R., what's your role in selecting new tech and what does that process look like?

Deb LaMere: [00:14:57.40] Yeah, you know, at Datasite, you know, my role is, whether it's for technology for the HR team clearly highly involved, partnering closely with the HR US team, with our I.T. team to really look at what are our needs in the business. And, you know, as we even look to just recently Datasite made a selection of a new ERP system, I was very involved in that situation, while it was led by the finance and accounting team with I.T.. There's a huge H.R. component to it, because whatever the HTM system is, it feeds into that overall piece. And so there's a lot of pieces where, and based on my background too, I've spent a lot of time in the technology world and understanding technology roadmaps are so important. And what what I look for when I'm thinking of a technology provider is I'm looking for that partner where I've got my processes, I've got my practices, I've got my goals and what I really wanted in an HTM payroll partnership is one that is going to partner with me, that's going to help me be successful in my goals, that the system isn't dictating how I run my business. It's there to help me and be agile with me as I run my business. And I think it's the same for any of the technologies that we do look at is it is going to partner with us? As opposed to dictating what we do.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:16:14.08] I love that. And I love how you're talking about I.T. and finance. And it's not just H.R. is the only one who makes the decision and is responsible for making sure that this is successful. It sounds like a collaborative team effort.

Deb LaMere: [00:16:30.52] Yeah, absolutely. I think it is a partnership because, I mean, the systems need to talk to one another and you want to make sure that it's the right one for the organization too. I mean, you can have that siloed view and you can say, I'm going to pick that. But does it work for the rest of the organization? So it's important to have that partnership.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:16:47.71] Something that goes along with technology selection. I think it's kind of hand-in-hand is change management. And so a lot of the things that you've been describing in the course of this interview, technology selection, all these pivots and moves and changes and new programs are key, like change management is a is an important part of that. Can you talk a bit about the strategies you've used to help drive adoption for maybe a piece of new technology or one of these company wide changes that you guys have made over, you know, almost the last 12 month period.

Deb LaMere: [00:17:19.78] Right, yes. So as I mentioned, we made a selection of an ERP vendor. And so we're working through actually the change management plan right now through that and getting people on board. And that's that's been the biggest piece is that you can put a new technology in, but it comes down to adoption and adoption relies on that change management plan. And it's really with with anything that's there. And how do you take that to the next steps and those next levels? And we implemented the Bonacelli system, which was the our rewards and recognition when we had training that went along with that. And we didn't really have a rewards and recognition system for that. So you weren't changing from one system to another and talking about how that's going to pivot and change. And so it was easy to to drive that up from scratch. But as we look at implementing that ERP, it's OK. You're going from one system to another. And how do these practices and change and how is it going to be better? Because even as you're going through some of these things, too, there's always that, well, if a new system comes in, how is that going to change my job? And it's bringing people along on the journey and it's being transparent in that journey.

Deb LaMere: [00:18:29.14] And that's really what I think about with a change management plan, is it's a journey. It's a journey of transparency, of involving others, involving the key stakeholders and helping people really understand why the change is important as you're moving to it. And and what's important. And I even take that change management strategy and think about that through, as you know, our organization, Datasite, rebranded in March of 2020. So we not only are working from home globally, we decided to change the name of our company and our brand completely. And along with that came a change management strategy, one that we had planned to do everything in person. But we had to pivot and think about how do we take everybody along on this brand journey that's going to be a virtual brand journey and make it feel exciting. Still something to really get out there and celebrate and be a part of it. So again, and be transparent with that in terms of how we evolved and how we got to this point, it really comes down to that journey of transformation and transparency.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:19:29.65] It's so interesting to do all these interviews because everybody has a little bit different slant. But collectively, kind of a lot of the conversations are the same. And if, for example, one of our interviews is with Cheryl Gochis, a CHRO at Baylor University and they had a new Oracle implementation, like in the middle of covid, also, just like you had with your rebrand and how they pivoted to be able to communicate that, make it fun and help ensure that people understood what the process was, because it's a big change and they're already in the middle of really big change because they're now working from home. And it's also a scary time. I think that you guys and your ability to pivot quickly is kind of in that whole change management is probably one of the most important data sets and skills and experiences that CHROs can have right now.

Deb LaMere: [00:20:27.48] Absolutely. If 2020 taught us anything it's that being able to adapt quickly, to pivot is really I mean, there was so much that went on in 2020. And I think even at the beginning of 2021 here too, that you've got to be ready to pivot and be able to support your employees and bring them along in a journey together and just be open and, and be there.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:20:50.46] What does the future of work look like for you from your perspective right now, for you and and Datasite, and maybe for other CHROs that you've been chatting with? What does that look like?

Deb LaMere: [00:21:01.20] Yeah, I mean, it's something that my colleagues and I do spend a lot of time talking about. What does work look like? I mean, the best example is, OK, we've been Datasite's been global for almost a year now. And in Minneapolis, we had just moved into a brand new office space. It was one of those beautiful high tech open concept collaboration spaces. Super amazing. We were in there for three weeks and that beautiful building has been empty for almost a year.

Deb LaMere: [00:21:31.20] And I think about our other workspaces that we've put a lot of time and thought into in terms of making it these collaborative offices. And I think one day we'll all be back there again. If we keep talking about new normals, I don't think anything will ever be the same, but I think people will be back in their offices again. There's that sense of camaraderie, the bonding shift that's there. But we do need to look at how work is going to be different. And really what we've learned from a lot of it, too, is that and I've experienced this not only a Datasite, but in other organizations that product teams always felt we need to be together in order to generate ideas and be able to deliver our new product. But what we found even at Datasite is, wow, we're getting a lot done. We released four products in this last year, then two that we've been able to do virtually. And so we're looking at different ways. And what are the tools and technology that are there to help people continue to connect and what it does for us to in the future? I think I've always talked about the war for talent and it's been over, but actually I think it's firing back up again. And it's because you now have this ability to open your skillset and really be able to recruit from anywhere because if you're willing to hire and have them sit anywhere, you're your world is open to you.

Deb LaMere: [00:22:54.21] So I think that's going to be a big piece. Then, too, is that the war for talent is going to heat up, that you can get people anywhere, it can open your diversity pipelines. It can do so much for you in terms of candidate pipeline. I think that's going to be a big change there then, too. But I think the other piece in the future of work is that we've always known that managers are vital to the success of an employee and a company, and their engagement know that nine out of ten employees a lot of times leave an organization not due to money, it's due to the manager. And so a lot of times what we want to make sure than, too, is that managers have tools in their toolboxes, are equipped to be able to support their employees, whether they're in the office, a hybrid of in the office or virtual or if they're all virtual. So I think that's a really big piece. And as we look forward then to it's how do we ensure that we've got plenty of our other programs that continue to engage employees, not only once they return to the office, but as they continue to be virtual, how do we keep them engaged and make sure we're getting them the right feedback and things like that then as well.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:24:00.18] All right. Last question. Most of HR leaders are super focused on morale and engagement right now. It's a challenge, remote virtually, to keep people engaged and excited and and just happy or grateful or thankful. Can you talk a little bit about your global recognition program and how it works?

Deb LaMere: [00:24:19.59] Sure. Yeah. No, I've been so excited that we finally got this. So it is recognition is one of those key points to an engaged workforce. So to help us really engage people, have this connectedness, bring people together, we needed a recognition platform that brought everybody together globally. So we contracted through Bonacelli where what we've done then, too, is that not only can employees do peer to peer thanks kudo's, we can also have managers can provide points along with their kudo's that employees can accumulate to get gift cards. And it's a wonderful rewards base and it's based on our value system. So not only are we able to reward and recognize people but the new values that we rolled out during our rebrand last March, we've been able to reinforce that as well, that it keeps people top of mind

in terms of who's demonstrating the values and how can I recognize people for that. And what we're going to be doing even more is bringing that even up to a higher level and being able to recognize those at quarterly town hall meetings when we get to that. But it's been a great way for people to connect and to see the great work that's going on and then also to see how our values are being demonstrated out there. The next piece that we plan to do with that than two is that we do plan to add an anniversary program to it, because that's just as important to whether someone's been here for one month or 27 years. We want to make sure they're recognized and I think it's great to be able to share that recognition with their colleagues then, too.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:25:52.11] I love it. And thank you for sharing about that, because, again, we need inspiration from from each other. And that can be a challenge right now because we, I mean, all of us are working remote. So in the normal world, we would go to a conference or event and talk to each other over cocktails or coffee and and now we are connecting a resume and listening to podcast. So I appreciate your your resources here.

Deb LaMere: [00:26:15.03] Absolutely.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:26:15.93] Well, Deb, thank you so much for taking the time to chat with us about this. Where can people go to learn more about you and the work that Datasite does?

Deb LaMere: [00:26:25.17] Sure. There's a couple of ways. Well, first, you can go out to a Datasite.com, which will tell you more about Datasite, who we are and how we help influence the world work with mergers and acquisitions. And you can find me on LinkedIn, always happy to connect with others and continue any conversations.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:26:44.97] Well, thank you. I'm going to link to the Datasite careers page and then your social media profiles too. So including LinkedIn, so people can connect with you and if they have a question, they can reach out and say, hey, I want to know more about your employee recognition program or what's your secret source for change management. But I appreciate you sharing all those things to kind of get the conversation started today.

Deb LaMere: [00:27:07.59] Yeah, absolutely. Happy to be here. Thanks for having me, Jessica.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:27:11.43] Thank you.

Closing: [00:27:12.81] There are so many changes in H.R. and we are agile, we're flexible, we're moving, we're growing, we're managing change. And even though things are virtual and remote, we have never lost our focus. And that is the focus of people. I love that Deb is sharing her insights and new programs and how she's leveraging different HR technology like this recognition program by Bonacelli. And talking with us

about how it is driving culture and change and bringing in some cases employees closer together. This VP of HR and CHRO role, these folks are at the heart of the business. And I am so thankful for Deb being willing to take the time to talk with us and share her experience. The H.R. role is critical to the future of a growing, transparent and profitable organization and its stories like these through our CHRO series, which is sponsored by Workology, and powered by HUB International, that we can work together and learn together even when we're far apart. Thank you for joining the Workology podcast sponsored by Workology. This podcast is for the disruptive workplace leader who is tired of the status quo. My name is Jessica Miller-Merrell. Until next time you can visit Workology.com to listen to all our previous Workology podcast episodes.