

Episode 267: Asynchronous Work & How UpWork Supports Black Employees



Intro: [00:00:00:06] 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: [00:00:25:23] Today's podcast is part of a special series on Workology, focused on the roles and responsibilities of the Chief Human Resource Officer, or CHRO. The Workology Podcast is sponsored by Workology. The CHRO, sometimes called 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 improve the overall efficiency of the company. Today I'm joined by Zoe Harte. She's the Chief People Officer at Upwork. She has guided the growth of the Upwork team by more than 75% since the Elance-oDesk merger in 2014. Zoe focuses on building a mission-driven culture for up works team of employees and global network of freelancers. Her philosophy of bringing one's whole self to work has resulted in employee engagement scores that have exceeded industry benchmarks for 12, yes, 12 consecutive quarters. Zoe, welcome to the Workology podcast.

Zoe Harte: [00:01:25:16] Thank you so much for having me. I'm thrilled to be here.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:01:28:04] Let's start with some background. You've been in HR roles for more than 20 years. How did your experience of job titles evolve over time into a Chief People Officer or CHRO role?

Zoe Harte: [00:01:40:15] Great question. Yeah, it was sort of a windy road, which I think is true for many people in my position. I started when I was on leave in between my master's program and my PhD program, and I started as a temp in the staffing department at Yahoo! And I was really fortunate that I joined such a wonderful company who taught me so many different things. And I just learned a huge amount there. We started, as I say, as a staffing assistant. I worked my way up to be a business partner there. And then thank you to a wonderful mentor and somebody who was my sort of business partner client, I went over to be Chief of Staff and Director of International Operations for Outworks Customer, come out for Yahoo's customer care organization for a few years. And that really was the moment that my career trajectory changed drastically because I had left H.R. for a while. I understood much more about what was fantastic about human resources and how it helped the business and all the places we make it worse, unintentionally. And so after doing that for a little while, I turned into a director of business partner roles at a different company, led the recruiting function there for a while, and then joined what was oDesk at the time as their first official H.R. person. I was

their head of H.R. and that was in 2013. And that was the beginning of the journey that we came Upwork and through great partnership and fantastic teamwork and a lot of opportunities and certainly some hard work, I am now the Chief People Officer, which I feel incredibly fortunate to be with this company.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:03:26:00] What a great story, and I love that you have worked your way through the H.R. function and then left and then came back, I mean, what a great perspective that you have and I think is something that more HR people should consider doing.

Zoe Harte: [00:03:42:23] I agree. It's one of the things I tell my team pretty frequently, which is you need to leave at some point if you would like this job in the future, because there is nothing that will open your eyes like being a recipient of our programs and our processes.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:04:00:15] What skills and experiences do you think outside of the one we just talked about, do you think are the requirements for that CHRO role, especially for HR professionals who are setting their sights on this role, either soon to be or along down the road?

Zoe Harte: [00:04:15:16] Yeah, I mean, I do think that the experience right outside of H.R. is critical. And I think there's some other things that are fundamental that you just need to build the muscle of doing. One is really understanding the business of the business. So I don't expect my team to be able to code or necessarily be the world's greatest salespeople. But I expect them to understand what is our company doing? How do we make money? What are our strategic priorities? How are all the different pieces of this fitting together? What's the competitive landscape, who we're up against and what are our strategic advantages? And I don't like the notion of H.R. as a sideline to the business. It needs to be part of how the work is done, how the business accomplishes its key results. I think that's critical and I think more and more HR people, especially successful H.R. leaders, are really business people who create results through programs associated with the people. But they're business people first and foremost. And I think the other side of that is and maybe this is you know, it sounds a little bit trite, but it's telling the truth and telling the truth all the time, especially when it's hard and especially when your boss doesn't want to hear it.

Zoe Harte: [00:05:27:29] Now, you need to be diplomatic about when you do that, but on how and privately is usually best. But really, really being the first person who will say, here's the thing that nobody's telling you about this strategic plan this year that we're all concerned about, or do you know that so and so and so and so are getting along and they're fighting over this budget allocation. And here's how I think we can solve it. But it's your job to be the first person to share bad news, certainly, but good news as well, and to really be the person who helps the CEO understand what is happening outside of their world. I think one of the concerns that I hear from our CEO and from others I've worked with in the past is they worry that nobody tells them things anymore, that everybody's just trying to give them the good news. And so they lose access to what's happening deep in the heart of the business. That is your job above everything else. You have to be the person who is sharing every piece of information that they need to know.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:06:30:11] This is great, they can really be, HR can really be a trusted adviser to.

Zoe Harte: [00:06:34:16] Absolutely.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:06:35:05] To that CEO, I mean, they do need that. They need, not a friend, but someone who they can trust that's going to tell it to him straight.

Zoe Harte: [00:06:44:08] Right, we all do. And I think that that's something I personally value deeply in my own team. I don't know a manager who wouldn't appreciate more people giving them feedback and telling them what's going on in their organization. So that's also that's a muscle you can start building that right now is that, you know, scheduler for interviews. You don't have to have a senior title to be the person who shares the news and talks and speak truth to power in your organization.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:07:08:15] I love that. It speaks truth to the organization, but also comes up with a solution.

Zoe Harte: [00:07:13:11] Precisely.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:07:14:19] I think that's that's the key. Not just the person who points out all the broken parts, but how to fix those broken parts.

Zoe Harte: [00:07:20:11] Yeah, right.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:07:22:02] Well, Upwork is a unique company and was, in my opinion, inherently more prepared for remote work culture when the pandemic hit. However, covid-19 impacts employees, whether working remotely or in the office. Can you talk a little bit about what you guys are doing to support your employees through this global health crisis and how the company has changed?

Zoe Harte: [00:07:42:20] Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I think to your point, Jessica, you're right. We certainly were more prepared than many companies because we have been a remote work company for over 20 years and have always been a hybrid company of both independent talent and corporate team members. But that

said, that's all very well and good when you you have structure and you're going into the office and you've got all the tools set up and all of those good things and people are connecting with you in a very standard way when all of a sudden, literally overnight, everybody is working for their homes. That's a really hard transition. And we felt that just like every other company, I think a few things that we put in place pretty quickly were above everything else, really clear communication, transparency, and an authentic level of communication and transparency. So with kids interrupting meetings, dogs on laps, people working with unmade beds behind them, and all those kinds of things for a while. And so we got the lay of the land and that still happens from time to time and that happens at all levels of the organization. So we didn't want anybody to have to pretend that everything is fine behind them and the only thing we care about is work.

Zoe Harte: [00:08:58:04] We knew that wasn't true. And we also don't want to ever create an environment where our team members feel afraid to speak authentically about what's happening for them. So that was important. We put a few key processes in place pretty quickly. One is that we have no meeting Wednesday where people are, no internal-meeting Wednesday, where we don't have any scheduled internal meetings. We use that from time for people to do deep project work or connect with those outside of Upwork. So client meetings are getting to know our customers better or learning from best practices with other companies. We also move to asynchronous work as our primary mode of communication. And so we're a G-Suite organization. A lot of comments in Google Docs and understanding when we needed to ask people to turn stuff around. And so being able to say to you, hey, here's that thing we're working on together, I've done my version. Can you take a look at it and make comments in it by the end of day tomorrow, please? And then knowing that at some point that would work for you and that you and I didn't have to be able to coordinate our schedules to make a meeting, to have that conversation, but we could do it in that way.

Zoe Harte: [00:10:06:24] We also got pretty, you know, really, frank about our own capacity about what we could do and what we could and when we could be available at a given time. So calendar blocks are really important for us. Here's the time I'm going to be doing asynchronous work. Here's a time I'm available for on-camera meetings. Here's a time I'm trying to get out of my house and walk around the blocks. I'm happy to do a one on one for many of our employees and team members. We get a lot of new parents. So nap time was critical. Tons of us are juggling homeschooling as well. So we're trying to just make sure that we really candid about that and that that was clear on our calendars and so that we had these blocks of time where we knew we could gather together on video if we needed to. But more and more of our work was happening in different ways. So those things really, really helped for us in terms of creating, you know, breathing room for our team members as they were navigating this once in a lifetime experience of everything being upended literally overnight.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:11:10:20] I love that you're talking about the asynchronous work because I don't think it's something that we talk about enough and and frankly, it requires a lot of planning and trust.

Zoe Harte: [00:11:21:12] It does require trust, right? Yeah, absolutely.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:11:24:26] One of the things I wanted you to talk with us about is the back to better program. What is that about? How did it happen? Walk us through it.

Zoe Harte: [00:11:34:11] Absolutely. This is something I'm hugely proud of Upwork for embracing so rapidly. As I said, we switch to a completely remote overnight. We were like many leaders and people trying to get our arms around exactly how rapidly covid was going to spread, how much of the population it was going to impact, and what we could do. We were doing these twice daily stand-ups with the entire executive team and a core group of leaders throughout the organization be at our workplace team members, the HR business partner, team, security legal, the whole, you know, the whole group of us. And it became really clearer after not that long that we needed to plan for this for the long haul. This wasn't going to be, oh, we're out of the office for two and a half, three weeks. This is going to be an ongoing thing. And so what is it we're working towards? And we had heard a lot of people in the news and friends at different companies talk about what we're going to go back to normal eventually. And what we decided at Upwork was we didn't want to go back to normal. There were a lot of burdens around that and things that were inefficient and poor uses of people's time and health. And so we wanted it to go back to better. And what would that look like for us? It would look like really embracing this asynchronous work style. It would look like continuing this very authentic level of communication. And so we had somebody in our organization who was one of the heads of our workplace function who happened to have this background in emergency communications, who ended up being the leader for this initiative for us.

Zoe Harte: [00:13:09:05] Her whole job is transition now to be around our team enablement and what we can do. And so she is working on aligning all the tools that we use organizationally, ensuring that our documentation processes are consistent. So for a new person joining Upwork, it isn't the scavenger hunt for the first three months to find out all the references you need, making sure that our connection and our meeting cadences are the same are our email protocol looks the same consistently throughout the organization while varying as necessary from team to team based on the needs of that organization. And so we know now that whatever life looks like 12 months from now and we believe that it's not going to be the same, but we will go back to a situation that is better. And part of that for us also just involves shuttering some of our office space as well, because we know a lot of us will remain at home if not five days a week, certainly three plus. And so we'll have a different mode for connection and collaboration in person when necessary and really intentionally versus any notion of like I just need to be there because my boss is there or I just need to like I'm expected to do this hour, commute each way, every day, because that's what work is.

Break: [00:14:28:06] Let's take a reset. This is Jessica Miller-Merrell and you were listening to the work of your podcast sponsored by Workology. We're talking about the role of the CHRO when it comes to developing rapport and engagement and a focus on diversity-inclusion with Zoe Harte. This is part of our CHRO series on the Workology podcast.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:14:49:17] What's the job title of the person in this new position called?

Zoe Harte: [00:14:54:25] Right now it is team enablement, although I think we are probably going to evolve that to make it more inclusive of all the factors that she's taking on and looking at for us.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:15:04:25] And is this fall under H.R. or we're...

Zoe Harte: [00:15:08:11] It does. I'm so lucky she's on my team.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:15:10:02] I love this. And this is, I think, the future. We're going to see more positions this and they got Chief Remote Officer, Virtual Officer. I love that you guys are thinking this way and trying to not get back to normal, but back to better.

Zoe Harte: [00:15:25:16] Back to better for sure.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:15:27:23] I want to talk a little bit about diversity. Upwork has been a leader in the DNA side of things even before the murder of George Floyd The Summer. And in your report on creating an anti-racist culture, which we're going to link to in the show notes, what programs? Talk to us about what programs you put in place to support Upwork's black employees.

Zoe Harte: [00:15:47:10] Yeah, absolutely. Um, I want to give real credit here to Dr. Erin Thomas, who joined us and for 2019 when we knew we wanted to really elevate the work we were doing around diversity, inclusion, and belonging. And obviously, that was prior to covid and prior to the murders of George Floyd and Brionna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery, but certainly not prior to this being an issue in our country, and we're fortunate that she joined for so many reasons, but one of which was that she came in and very rapidly helped us identify some of the things that we we knew were working on but weren't doing as effectively as possible. So for us, one of the things we knew was that the attrition of our black employees was higher than for other demographic groups. And Erin helped us identify that there was really an issue around inclusion, not belonging. People loved working at Upwork and felt connected to our mission. But inclusion was a place where we could do better by our black employees in terms of bringing them along in their careers, giving them feedback. Frankly, we had definitely opportunities for cross demographic feedback to not go as smoothly as possible. And so those were some of the things that we did right away. She created a black excellence summit that happened actually like right in February.

Zoe Harte: [00:17:14:22] It was sort of the last time we were all together in Chicago where the black team members were all together. And then managers and leaders came at the end for an hour to hear feedback on the day and see what we could do differently and where there were expectations that we leveled up, how we were working. So those are some of the things we've done. We've also talked, as you know, very openly about what we're working on, our commitment to being an anti-racist company. Hayden Brown, who has

been with Upwork for nine years now, maybe even 10, became our CEO at the beginning of this year and has taken a very active stance in terms of her commitment to creating in Upwork, which is all about inclusion and equitable processes. And so while some of the stuff we've done has garnered attention on social things like our Black Excellence Summit and the workaround being an anti-racist company, some of the most important work is the stuff that we're doing foundationally in our processes to eliminate bias in our interviewing process and ensure consistency of the questions we use, making sure that we are continuing the work that we've done in terms of analyzing our promotion rates and being explicit about those goals and talking openly about where we're falling short of our aspirations and ideals.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:18:37:05] In our prep call, you mentioned I wanted to make sure we talked about this, that Upwork offered bereavement leave for black employees and others who needed it after the murder of George Floyd. Can you talk a little bit about how this came about and how it how it worked out?

Zoe Harte: [00:18:52:29] Yeah, absolutely. This, again, with all credit due to Erin for calling attention to this issue. And while we had in the past said to our team members to take time away as necessary when there are troubling things that are happening outside of work, this was different and this was a specific trauma for our black employees. And we wanted to acknowledge that. And it really had been this lightning moment that shone a light on the racial injustice and disparity of treatment that we have in this country. And I think for so many of our black employees, this was not just I need a day away. This is the culmination of four hundred years of how this treatment has felt to our black citizens in this country. And we wanted to honor that and acknowledge that this was different. And so by saying like take bereavement leave, like treat this as the trauma that it is and we see you and we know that this is what this is, then we were able to create more space for different conversations and for people to really take the full time that they needed. And that was pretty powerful. I know there was also a closed, you know, sort of memorial service for our black team members to acknowledge and talk about these losses that they were seeing over the course of last year. And so, obviously, while it's something that is, you know, you wish you didn't need to have, it felt important to acknowledge that this this was different and that we saw black employees.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:20:38:08] Thank you for for sharing and thank you for us for acknowledging and and doing these things to help support all employees. Yeah. Especially when times are just so crazy. But continuing on, even when times are OK, like we should, we should be having these conversations and supporting our our team members in a way that is meaningful for them.

Zoe Harte: [00:21:04:26] Absolutely. And I agree wholeheartedly.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:21:08:09] I am so appreciative. You. If you talking about this, because I've heard and I've been in close conversations in circles with people where they are talking about these things at all with their people, and we need to be having these conversations.

Zoe Harte: [00:21:22:17] Yeah, right. And I think it's HR's job to be the leader in that.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:21:26:03] One of the other areas I wanted to talk to you about was, you know, we talked about you talked a lot about the culture and and how you're supporting employees. I wanted to talk to you about or I wanted to ask you about your role in supporting company leaders and employees with self-care and mental health because there are a lot of moving parts in this. So what are you guys other what are other things that you're doing to maybe spur some creative juices for those who are listening?

Zoe Harte: [00:21:54:02] Yeah, absolutely. So I mean, I think a lot of the protocol that we put in place about flexibility and very clear articulation of expectations for everybody within their role so that they could then decide how to accomplish what they needed to do for the business, that felt like the most important thing that people needed. They didn't want to be in all these meetings being asked, like, how are you how are you going to, like, tell me what you need me to do? And I'm going to go and do it and then please leave me alone, because I'm also like teaching third grade and trying to manage the people in my house and all these different things. That felt really important. And we have a lot of great benefits around self-care and mental health within the Upwork framework. Certainly, a lot of that is through traditional benefits. We use modern health and created opportunities for people to get coaching and or therapy directly on their phones for people who were under lockdown. We also have people on our platform who are who, as a side hustle are yoga teachers. And so we've had twice Weekly Standard yoga and meditation that's free for everybody to participate in at different times because we have people in 800 cities around the world working at Upwork. So having it done for people to connect and just have some time to move together, but also come together and be intentional about how we're creating time in our heads and in our hearts as well.

Zoe Harte: [00:23:24:03] Felt really important. As I said, a lot of this has also been about talking about what's working and what's not and being honest and creating space for people to take time away, encouraging people to take vacation, even though you're not going anywhere. Because I think we saw a lot of people say, I'm just going to I'm just going to keep working as a really being explicit about the need to take time off and really doing our very, very best to check in. I think the other thing, and this is a theme with how Upwork shows up as an organization is having the very hard conversations. I mean, I I remember at the end of the summer last year, seeing a report from the CDC that said 11 percent of American adults seriously considered suicide in June of last year and that number felt so terrifying to me, and so we talked about that and we, you know, how are we creating opportunities for people to get the care they need for us to know if something is going on that is above above like I'm having a rough day or a series of rough days. We also created a program called Candle in the Window, which we learned about through another tech company. So I don't want to say that was our idea originally, which was during all the surveys we were doing for our team to check in on them and see what they needed in terms of like ergonomic equipment or all that.

Zoe Harte: [00:24:53:11] We asked a lot about how people were holding up, and there were two additional questions. One was, is there anybody you're worried about? Is there anybody you just want HR to check in with? Do you think that there's somebody on your team who just hasn't been themselves and it's different? Let us know. We'll reach out. And then there was also a box people could tick saying candle in the window, which meant I need to get out of my house. I need your help getting out of my house for some period of time. And those people with no questions asked were given an additional stipend to go and work at flex work site,

assuming they can figure out a way to do that safely. And that could be because there were little kids running around and they just needed a break. It could be because they had a lot of roommates and they were all competing for wi fi. But it could also be because they were really, really struggling and their anxiety had skyrocketed or they were becoming, you know, worried about like. You know, alcohol dependency or any of those things in their home where home was no longer the best place for them to be consistently. We created a way for them to get a break from that without having to disclose more than they wanted to.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:26:09:12] Ok, can you talk about Upwork's Ali. Sorry. Can you talk about Upwork's Allyship programs?

Zoe Harte: [00:26:15:17] Yeah, absolutely. And we have a great program called Do the Work, which sums it up pretty quickly about how we expect everybody to show up and engage organizationally. You know, one of the things we've seen has been people saying, like, I really want to help, but I don't know how to start. And that tends to put the burden on the underrepresented group and our black employees or trans employees. Do you like how do I talk to you about this? We'll do the work means do the work, start yourself, read like talk to other people, learn, listen to podcast, watch movies, do some real work and then start the conversation. I think it's really important for our team to realize this isn't about you. This is about you showing up better for others and so are do that Do the Work allyship program is an ongoing program. We have brought in some phenomenal outside speakers to lead guided conversations. There's significant pre-work in advance of those conversations. So people come in having done some work and really thought about things. We then facilitate small group conversations and talk about how we're going to hold ourselves and one another accountable to lean in more to these topics. We also have, for example, if you look at our black employee network, there is an allyship group, which is for us to continue educating each other as allies without having to constantly go to our black employees and say, you know, we're thinking about this, et cetera, et cetera. We're doing that work in educating ourselves and hopefully showing up much more effectively for our black team members.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:27:59:08] I love that.

Zoe Harte: [00:28:00:13] Yeah.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:28:00:28] What advice would you give to H.R. leaders who want to start a conversation and engage employees about anti-racism and diversity, but maybe they aren't sure where to begin?

Zoe Harte: [00:28:10:21] Yeah, I mean, I think a lot of what we just talk about in terms of do the work, that program, it's true here, too. You need to put in some effort before you start the conversation. It's not great to show up and be like, I really want to help, but I don't know what to do. Tell me what to do. That doesn't help. That's an additional burden on these team members. So understand where you can start. And there's so

many incredible resources. Rachel Cargill has a program called The Great Unlearning. Laila Said has this book called Me and White Supremacy that you can work through with journaling prompts and do that and an accountability partnership. There's just so many resources available that we need to show up and do some of the work before we start asking and engaging with our employees of color. And so I would advise that we do that and that that may be a really good place to start. And then and then there is, I think, an opportunity for continued conversations, frank dialogue with your teams about what's working and what's not and encouraging people to share. But you have to create the environment of trust before that happens. Nobody is just going to fill out a form and tell you everything. You've got to you have to put in the effort yourself.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:29:30:06] Well, Zoe, thank you for taking the time to talk with us. This was an amazing conversation. Where can people go to learn more about you and Upwork?

Zoe Harte: [00:29:40:18] Absolutely. Upwork is Upwork.com. I am on LinkedIn and Twitter and so I would love, love to engage and keep the conversation going.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:29:49:11] Perfect. Well, we'll link to the Upwork career site as well as your LinkedIn and your Twitter too. So they are able to connect with you and the other resources that you've mentioned today.

Zoe Harte: [00:29:58:16] Absolutely, yeah. And follow Dr. Erin Thomas. She's great and a great resource for so many of these things.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:30:04:22] Awesome. Thank you again so much. So I appreciate it.

Zoe Harte: [00:30:07:16] Thank you, Jessica. I appreciate it.

Closing: [00:30:09:15] There have been so many changes in H.R. in the past decade, but let alone the last twelve months, we have never, though, lost our focus on our people. HR teams are now being formed around a senior level role like the CHRO or Chief People Officer who are more connected to strategy and operations of the overall business. Zoe's interview and her insights here give us just a nice look into a day in the life of the CHRO and some initiatives and programs that are working for Upwork, including the areas of diversity inclusion. We need to be more inclusive than we ever have before and really dialed in to understanding what our people need and want from us in order to be the best selves. Thank you so much for Zoe to take the time to talk about her experience in this area and how it's positively impacting Upwork and their employee team.

