Episode 268: What Learning & Talent Development Looks Like For a Remote Workforce

Intro: [00:00:00.21] 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: [00:00:25.32] Welcome to the Workology podcast, sponsored by Workology. As H.R. leaders, we've been having conversations about supporting remote workforces for nearly a year now. While larger percentages of employees have been working from home for over the past several years, the global pandemic really pushed us into the deep end of the pool when it comes to shifting to that virtual and remote workforce. While we don't know exactly what the new normal will be, we do know that our companies and our teams must incorporate communicating with remote employees in hiring, onboarding, performance reviews and training and development. The question that I want to talk about today, that series of questions I want to talk about today is how can we recreate the in-person training experience? Do we want to do that if we're all working virtually? And how do we do that? Create a great training environment and experience without giving up elements of our company culture? How do we keep employees and our teams connected and engaged? Well, that's what we're going to talk about today. Joining me on this episode is Matt Brown. He's the Vice President of Learning and Brand Success at Schoox. They're an agile learning and talent development platform. Matt, welcome to the Workology podcast.

Matt Brown: [00:01:41.25] Thank you so much for having me. I'm excited to be here today.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:01:44.22] Let's start with your background. Your background is in H.R., specifically in learning and development, and that goes back nearly two decades. Can you talk a little bit about what led you to the talent development side of things?

Matt Brown: [00:01:57.44] I always enjoy talking about this because it's I think it's good for everybody to understand that we can all get to this destination in very, very different ways. I didn't come from what I would consider a traditional path, although these days what what is traditional path? I have always found myself really compassionate and empathetic to the needs of others and really focused on just trying to create meaningful interactions in all aspects of my life and in in my professional experiences. I've always really looked at H.R. and believe that H.R. is the heartbeat of the business. I mean, it's in the name Human

Resources. And so I early on started as a project manager and. Right. That that puts me in a world that has continuous change and always looking to solve problems. And and I found that early in those project manager engagements, I kept focusing on, hey, wait, my team that's helping me accomplish the goals of this project need development. They have other jobs in the business, but they need development to really work on this project and to to help it be successful. And so I started picking up a little bit of those elements through project management.

Matt Brown: [00:03:19.05] And then one day I just sort of had this epiphany that I was in the wrong place altogether. So I marched into H.R. I tend to make relationships wherever I go. So I had a relationship with my recruiter that actually brought me into the company. And I said I. I feel like there's something more. I feel like I'm not contributing in the ways that that I should be. And, you know, she said, great, then let's let's figure out how we start to mobilize you in that direction. And so we just kind of continue to pull things into my project management activities. And then that led me to to be able to start taking on training responsibilities for my department. And then it just kind of blew up from there. I think I'm definitely. Someone that approaches my career with a lack of fear is maybe the best way to describe it, I I learned early on you have to express your desires if you know that you have a passion in a certain area. Make it known so you can find ways to tap into it.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:04:28.11] Two things I'm thinking about as you're chatting here, how awesome that you had an amazing support system in that recruiter to help really cultivate. Those things, I mean, that is it, that's something I think that all of us want from our mentors, leaders and peers, is to help us grow and support those and to do that within an organization. So that's awesome.

Matt Brown: [00:04:54.89] I have found since that very first job, I always build a relationship with my recruiter. And it has it has always just been one of the greatest relationships because they're they're the face of the company. Their job is to try and entice and get people, good people into the company that fit with the culture. So they've kind of got their finger on the pulse. And to me, it just made sense that that relationship can help me better understand how I can plug in and what other little, I think, kind of fun fact worth mentioning. None of my family, I think, really set out early on to become educators, but I think there's also an element that might be at the DNA level. My mother, my sister, my brother, my grandmother, my aunts, my uncle. I mean, like there's just so many people in my family that found their way to education, whether it was traditional education in the school systems, whether it was corporate education or just coaching in general. So there I think there's also an element, at least I believe for myself, there's a DNA component to it as well.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:06:04.37] I love that the second thing I wanted to call out in your introduction, and I've talked long and hard about this and socially on this podcast, we have been spending a lot of time talking to executive HR leaders, CHRO, Chief People Officers. And what's came back is a skill that is very important in these executive-level roles is change management and project management. So I think you are really an example for so many of us to follow in this tool, these tools in your tool about that. You have to help really drive organizational change and focus on that learning and development piece.

Matt Brown: [00:06:45.59] I have maintained for a few years and I talk about it quite often, the role of learning and change management. And it baffles me that so many organizations leave this on the table. Every time I think about change management, it is a process. Everybody goes through this process. We all go through it at different speeds, in different ways. We connect to different elements of it. And that is a beautiful parallel to what a training course is every time we deliver a new training intervention. Our job is to help people move from where we are at the beginning of that training to where we need to be at the end. And it's just a kind of self-contained mini change management exercise. I think, you know, we're just built in a way that equips us to navigate change as learning and development professionals. And so there's there is a beautiful parallel, and I have drawn on those skills heavily over the years.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:07:44.33] As HR leaders have shifted to support a more dispersed workforce and this, I think, will continue into hopefully the foreseeable future, I wanted to ask you, how have you seen training and development fit into that remote learning? Because it can be a challenge. So talk us through that.

Matt Brown: [00:08:03.05] It's been a very interesting transition. I think, you know, the first thing that that I saw happen is this transition. While some people have been working remotely for years, a lot of companies were resistant to the notion and this sort of force that on the table, we had to figure it out. What it's done is it's it's exposed a couple of things. And one of the biggest things I've been exposed is people are talking about how they maybe didn't have a comprehensive enough strategy for training. We maybe got complacent over the years and deemphasize the priority and in this transition where everything was completely disrupted. Learning and development became absolutely critical, we had to teach people how to navigate change and uncertain times, we had to teach people how to reorient themselves to an office environment when they don't have their coworkers in eyesight, they don't have their boss there. They don't have just that the normal conventions. There was a lot of learning that had to take place early. So I think, you know, I saw I saw learning and development really play that firefighter role on the very front end. And then quickly everything changed and it became all about, oh, it's not enough just to help him navigate the change. But the business they work in, the job they have, the customers we interact with, all of those elements have changed as well. And so we have to find a different way to to help people grow and develop in some very unconventional circumstances.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:09:48.46] Like the shine of remote work has kind of faded a little bit, and the fact that everyone was sort of forced into remote work, it debunked a lot of these myths where everybody thought, like working from home was easy and it's all yoga pants and, you know, pajamas and it's hard and in fact, it's very productive. I find that when I'm at home, I work more maybe because I'm really bad at work-life balance. But I think that it has changed a lot of people's opinions about remote work.

Matt Brown: [00:10:20.91] I agree, I consistently and heard businesses share tremendous success stories that productivity has gone through the roof and they've got, you know, employees seem to be a bit more engaged, but it's for so long, everybody who couldn't work from home, it's kind of like grass is greener on the other side mindset. Right? Like, I couldn't work from home. That's all I ever wanted to do because it's got to be so great that I can just not put on, you know, I can stay in my pajamas, I can, no makeup, no hair, no whatever the case may be. If it's just comfortable, I can do my laundry and I can do all the things. And you

realize really quickly that you've you've got to have discipline. You've got to keep a schedule. You have to manage a lot of priorities. And I think the pandemic kind of amplified because it's not just working from home anymore. School children are at home and spouses are at home and it's now working remotely where I have to tune out a whole bunch of stuff that didn't exist in my world at work. But, you know, you you see people that quickly said, yep, this is for me, I want to do this forever and ever, which creates a different challenge. Businesses are starting to kind of recoil and pull people back to work and end the remote working. And you have the others that said this is clearly not for me. I need the office. I want the office. Give me the office. So it's I think H.R. and businesses, in general, are facing some really unique challenges ahead as we try to navigate that dynamic of retaining a workforce when our policies may not support their interest anymore. And, you know, competing for talent in a very, very different scale than we've ever seen.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:12:12.76] One of the things I wanted to ask you about is how we can better support learning and development of our employees who are remote. What are some things that you are seeing right off the bat that companies or HR teams or LND folks can implement?

Matt Brown: [00:12:29.53] I think first and foremost, it starts with being willing to be flexible and not be held captive to convention. I think, you know, we saw a lot of people really struggle with, oh, I used to do these classroom experiences because we were very much focused on that in-person interaction. And we just took our PowerPoint slides. We slapped them in a Zoom meeting and we called it virtual training. And we all realize that doesn't work. And we have so many tools available to us today. Technology can really, really be a huge benefit in in supporting all of the developmental activities. But it means we have to be willing to just unpack. All the things that we know, we have to be willing to challenge the things we know or the things that we believed would work. And, you know, I mean, I think it's even down to the small things being willing to. Communicate to your workforce, hey, everybody, it's OK to just stop and take a breath. I get that we've got a lot of stuff to do, but if you need to stop and just check out for a minute, go do that. Mental health is is a critical component to learning and development as we go forward in the remote workforce and the hybrid workforce is turning into that. And then just be be willing to explore everything.

Break: [00:13:59.65] Let's take a reset. This is Jessica Miller-Merrell, and you were listening to the Workology podcast, sponsored by Workology. Today, we're talking about learning and development in a virtual environment with Matt Brown of Schoox.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:14:14.54] The other questions I wanted to ask you about in relation to kind of this new new workplace that we're we're living and working in, is how do we set performance goals when we have so many people working remotely? Like how do we help ensure that people are engaged and they're meeting their targets when we're disconnected or we're working asynchronously? I'm seeing a lot more of those kinds of things as well.

Matt Brown: [00:14:44.59] I mean, I think it's a very similar, very similar answer in that it's. Be flexible. I think one of the things we saw on the performance and goals side of the House through the impacts of 2020 is that we realized how many of us weren't doing those things. We were kind of complacent to the, oh, yep,

somebody told me I need to go set goals or somebody told me I needed to have a mid-year check in with my team. But we weren't having those recurring monthly, biweekly, weekly, daily interactions where we're actually focused on how can we help you develop and how can we help move obstacles out of your way so that you can achieve the goals that we've set so that you can achieve the goals that you've set for yourself and you can continue to to thrive. So, I mean, I think. The easiest answer I could give to that question is start start doing things consistently, start doing things small, incremental things. I have found I've been a remote worker for, I think the last six years now full time and then before that off and on. And one of the things I felt in the last two to three years, part of it is the company I work for and the culture that we've created. But part of it is just we're all adapting to this and it's becoming more, more regular in our lives. But I feel more connected to the people at my organization in a virtual workforce than I think I ever have in a physical and personal space. And it's because we found ways to leverage technology for all the things, whether it's learning, whether it's setting goals, whether it's just opening up collaborative conversations. You know, setting out to do these things with purpose goes a long way.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:16:46.47] I love that you point that out. Better relationships, even though we're not seeing each other in person, it is absolutely possible. With so much uncertainty around not just this year, but what the workplace is going to look like not just in 2021 but beyond, what changes do you think that we as HR and talent leaders should be making to maintain that culture of learning moving forward?

Matt Brown: [00:17:16.44] I think it comes down to being willing to explore everything there. There's nothing that should be off limits from being opened up and revisited and re-evaluated as it comes to tools and processes. I think, you know, to go specific with an actionable insight, making sure that you're integrating skills and competencies into the learning strategy is really going to help give so much more life to the things that we're doing. It gives us first and foremost, it gives us line of sight to what it is that we're trying to impact and then also being able to understand how we're impacting why and or maybe why not. There is impact or no impact. And, you know, I think we have to really focus on a more strategic long term plan where everything has a continuous thread that allows us to just continue to keep learning alive in the way that we're breathing. Right. Learning should be happening all the time. And we just have to, in many cases, have to get out of our own way and let it happen.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:18:41.55] I'm thinking more about engagement right now and and how much of it has been a challenge for us since the beginning of all this crazy black mirror episode that we're all living in. And weeks have turned into months and our teams are isolating. And we talked about many folks working from home for the first time. What can you tell us about learning and development as they relate to employee engagement? How do the two really go together?

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:19:08.33] It comes a lot for me down to relationships when I think about the role of learning in every organization. And then I go deeper into the team and I think about the skills and that the kind of construct of the people we have available and the function. There's a lot of capability to build relationships, to really be stewards of company culture. The learning and development team, is it a very unique position? In my opinion, in many organizations, because we're viewed as the experts, there is kind of an implied level of trust. And the learning team always brings me information. They bring me knowledge, they bring me the expertise to to solve the problems that I'm facing. And so I think we have to just lean into

that and really allow learning and development to go full tilt, embracing the integration of culture and values into all of our learning activities, embracing the relationship building that comes through oftentimes these group interaction. So if we're going to distribute all of our learning in self-paced e-learning, we still need to create some opportunities for people to connect and discuss. And I'm just kind of build some relationships around that topic or around the shared experience or shared lack of understanding. In some cases, there's there's a lot of great ways that that can work. But I think we we have to be willing to to allow learning and development to go a little bit more broad outside of just delivering the content.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:20:52.92] Well, let's let's talk about that a little bit as it relates to metrics, because I feel like it's so important for any, not just human resources or recruiting or talent, but all of us together to make sure that the work that we do aligns and it directly relates to business goals and strategy. So talk about how Schoox works, because this is really one of my favorite areas of what you guys do and why this is important.

Matt Brown: [00:21:25.68] I, I can talk about this all day long, so I fair warning. You may have to cut me short. But I think it starts with just fundamentally so many times we, I hear organizations are either not focused on any sort of measurement as part of the learning strategy or they're stuck in a place where it's like I'm overwhelmed. They don't know where to start. So to kind of lead into that, I think, you know, we always like to have conversations with customers as we're trying to help them bring the business impact portion of the Schoox platform into their strategy and into their experience. It's being more methodical, being more planful and trying to always ask yourself when you're working with with developing learning for simple questions, who are you trying to impact? What are you trying to impact? How are you expecting to impact it and by how much? And, you know, a lot of times when we think about the what you're trying to impact, this is where we get into a gray area. It's a lot of room for opportunity. We we tend to set higher or lofty, unmeasurable goals. We want people to learn what they learned. Well, how do we know, if they've learned, what we could test them? And really a lot of systems do that, we test and that that does some measurement, which tells me that they can at least retain the information long enough to answer the test questions.

Matt Brown: [00:22:59.30] But where we have to go further is really going deeper into following through reinforcements and follow ups and in Schoox, we actually create two different elements that support this extension of measurement. One is the on-the-job training experience, which effectively is a fairly comprehensive task list in which you can identify that certain tasks are related to certain skill or competency areas. So if I demonstrate that task and my manager or my trainer signs off and gives me a positive rating, the system then knows that I have actually demonstrated some competency and that particular skill or knowledge area. So it gives us a place to record the observation of how I am applying the knowledge. And then I think that the second thing that we do, which is quite possibly one of my favorite things about the platform, is our business impact engine, which allows you to really understand how your particular learning experiences, your learning activities are impacting specific business metrics, so this does rely on you having an understanding of how to answer those four questions. I want to I want to impact all managers. Specifically, I want to impact their ability to manage effective employee engagement to get us where we need to be.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:24:35.10] I expect that through the activities in these courses, we are going to drive a 10 percent improvement in the employee engagement score. So I've answered those questions. In Schoox you can deliver training and say that this training is for that skill, that confidence area. You can import the business metrics such as employee engagement or employee retention or sales or any number of metrics. And then you can start to visualize using the data to see the impact on that particular metric, whether it is something that could be understood through compliance or completion, looking at maybe exam scores, so is there a magic number? I think we all would love to be able to have a benchmark and kind of know where the targets are. And maybe there is a considerable performance difference when someone scores and eighty two percent on an exam for that item versus 85 percent. So really being able to dive down to understand this course was intended to impact that metric. And then let's really see how that comes together at the person level, you can get deeper in understanding how you're learning is impacting at that skill or competency level based on each user's interaction and collecting assessment data on a periodic basis.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:26:03.24] I love that all different levels and whether it's the organization or the trainer or the individual, they are part of this process and they're involved in looking at the big picture and then the micro-level. I think that's incredibly important for that person. In particular, that employee understand how they fit into and this training fits into the larger organizational plan. Because a lot of times you go to training and I'm thinking this in the traditional sense. You go to a training, maybe take your project management class, and then you come back and you don't really understand the Y or the how or the what for for that and then how it's going to benefit not just you and your team, but the business. So I love that you guys have all these different parts together so you can truly measure and understand expectations and then the return on investment for that training program.

Matt Brown: [00:26:58.14] We we definitely believe that, you know, delivering learning without the ability to measure the impact is. You know, it makes it way harder than it has to be because you don't necessarily have a way to understand what the goal line looks like. And if you don't know that it keeps moving and if you don't know what the parameters are and what exactly you're trying to impact, you're really just kind of throwing stuff at the wall to see what sticks. And then you're you're telling a story based on experiences and based on your feeling and not actually being able to substantiate it with data. And it's data that helps us understand why if we put 10 people through the same exact course and they all passed the same test with the same score, they have different performance outcomes. Their ability to translate that information into on the job application is different because they're all humans, we're all different. And so different things stick, different things don't stick. And data is how we uncover that. So we can really be most effective at impacting the business.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:28:10.51] Well, Matt, thank you so much for your time today on the Workology podcast. I wanted to ask you, where people can go to learn more about you and then the work that you do?

Matt Brown: [00:28:22.24] So you can find me on LinkedIn. There are quite a few of us out there. But if you look at MWBDAWG., that's how you'll find me on LinkedIn and Twitter. Also, check out the Schoox Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter pages. I've got a lot of activity that filters into our company sites.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:28:44.95] We'll link to Schoox as well as Matt's LinkedIn profile in the show notes, along with some other helpful resources to help you jumpstart your training and development program or living it up or relaunch it or use it in trying to ensure to use those metrics to be able to measure the effectiveness of your training program. So thank you so much, Matt, for for talking with us today.

Matt Brown: [00:29:10.84] Thank you for having me. It was a pleasure.

Closing: [00:29:12.88] None of us have ever worked through a global pandemic. That is one thing I know for sure. And we have to consider the impact of this on our remote workplace. As we get close to a year of working remotely, trying to replicate an in-person training, onboarding or learning process in a virtual environment can be more challenging than we expect. I think we all can say hallelujah, Amen. You got that right, Jessica. I'm so glad to have the opportunity to talk to Matt on the podcast today about establishing a culture of learning, how to measure that and how we move forward.