

Episode 278: Strategic HCM, Change Management and Trends in HR



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: [00:00:25.65] Welcome to the Workology podcast sponsored by ACE the HR Exam and Upskil HR. This past year has been a wild ride not just for HR but for everyone, but especially human resources. We've had challenges to protect the safety of essential workers, support a remote workforce, re-establish and reinvent our diversity and inclusion initiatives, and push the limits and change management as we try to drag and I mean drag our entire teams, especially the leadership team of people globally through crisis none of us have ever seen before. As HR leaders, of course, we want to be able to predict the future, see the trends coming and understand what we should be preparing for two months from now, a year and a half from now, two years from now and beyond. In short, this last year has been a crazy shit show. It's been a lot to unpack. I'm excited about our guest today because he's going to kind of help make sense of what the future holds for us. His name is Jon Ingham. Jon is a consultant, trainer, speaker and writer focused on strategic and innovative management. His experience includes thirty years in engineering, IT, change management and human resources, including H.R. and organizational development. Currently, Jon is delivering and facilitating learning through his Strategic H.R. Academy because he has such a great strategic perspective across our specialties. I am pleased to get the opportunity to talk with him about how HR leadership is changing, what tools we need as current and future HR leaders, and what the new normal in the workplace looks like. Jon, welcome to the Workology Podcast.

Jon Ingham: [00:02:06.12] Brilliant to be here, Jessica. I love talking to you and and wonderful to be on the podcast.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:02:11.28] I know we need to see each other soon. I think we were saying the last time we saw each other was in Chicago, but that's been a couple of years ago.

Jon Ingham: [00:02:17.13] It has.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:02:18.75] Yeah, well, let's talk about your background and strategic human capital management and organizational effectiveness. And this is what I like to call broad but focused, meaning that

you've done a lot of deep work in a lot of different areas in H.R. but in other places. I'm an H.R. leader, what do you think I should be focusing on to prepare our workforce for the coming year? What are you hearing?

Jon Ingham: [00:02:42.84] Well, yeah, everything's changed, hasn't it? So I think it's always a struggle in H.R. to focus on sort of specific parts and particularly because I have a strategic focus to what I do. And a core part of sort of making H.R. more strategic, I think is about prioritizing on the key things that are going to make the difference. And it's always hard because, you know, whatever changes in the business or elsewhere, we always need to sort of align different aspects of H.R. towards doing that. So I think it's changed and I'd focus, I mean, in terms of the breadth, the different HR process areas I've worked in, and I think your organization, I mean, that was the focus of my book, *The Social Organization*, a couple of years ago. I was mainly around organization design because even back then I could see that was a big area that was a lot more opportunity to increase our impact within HR. And but I think that's even more so now. And in fact, yeah, all there I was saying that everything's changed. In a sense it hasn't. You know, all that all that's happened, I think, is that we've sort of accelerated a couple of years into the future. So all of the things that were taking place in terms of remote, digital, and so on, you know, they've just arrived a little bit more quickly than we thought they would. So, you know, all of those shifts around organization towards more agile, more network based of all organizations. Absolutely. They were taking place a couple of years ago, but they're the absolutely key today.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:04:20.43] Well, it's good to hear you to hear you say that. I feel like right now H.R. professionals are not sure what's next. I mean, I'm not sure what's next. You're not sure what's next. But but we're trying to plan for multiple different scenarios. So it's good for you to say, OK, organizational development, that should be a focus and being strategic. So not trying to do all the things, but picking a few priorities that maybe you can start to build your strategic plan from.

Jon Ingham: [00:04:53.00] Yeah, absolutely, and and that is so difficult, isn't it? I mean, the sort of the increasingly virtual way that we've got to do so much of what we do and therefore, I think lifting ourselves out of all of the operational requirements, we know that's always been more difficult and it's probably even more difficult to do now than it ever used to do. And I just think as soon as we have a remote or hybrid workforce, which then will, I think, increasingly lead very naturally to a more distributed, more asynchronous, more heterogeneous way of working. Everything else changes as well. And yeah, I just think that the key way of tackling that is to focus on the overall organization, what we do and how we're going to do it. And it's organization design and development, I think, which are key to that.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:05:50.81] You're not US based. I would be interested in kind of hearing your perspective, like how is the vaccine rollout going for you guys over there? And then is there a back to normal that you're hearing about or thinking more about with the H.R. professionals that you're talking with in your clients?

Jon Ingham: [00:06:11.69] Yeah, we're we're a little bit ahead of the US. The the the vaccine rollout was going very well, which is we've had a difficult pandemic like the states, but things do seem to be correcting

themselves again. But like you say, there's so much that we now need to replan for without really understanding what the future is going to be. And well, the good news, I think is, you know, HR is definitely at the metaphorical table. We're immersed in those conversations because all of the conversations about the future of business are all about people at the moment. And, you know, different organizations are planning different things. There's a certain amount of planning for different eventualities, different scenarios going on, which I think is useful and helpful to encourage different organizations to do that. But yeah, you know, I, the worry, I think, or the or the slight hesitancy, which you can hear is when we have the global financial crisis, and particularly because I was sort of fairly new to social media at the time. And, you know, I remember blogging and tweeting about the new reset, how everything was going to be different. And I don't think very much was actually. So I'm a little bit cautious, but I do think this shift, this disruption has been bigger and longer and deeper for more people. And I think, therefore, the likelihood that we just go back to the way things were before is a lot less this time. So I, I don't think everyone's going to go back to the office. I think we have got more hybrid future in front of us.

Jon Ingham: [00:08:12.44] And I mean, you asked about what I'm hearing and this isn't that really. But what I'm saying a lot about and challenging H.R. practitioners where I hear them talking about going back to the office is I think a lot of the conversation is about whether the organization as a whole wants people back or not, if they just want to save on real estate, whether individuals will want to go back or not. And the piece in the debate, I think is badly missing and we need to start focusing much more on is the layer in between. You know, the key to me is the effectiveness of the teams and networks, which actually I wrote about in the social organization again and but, you know, are so important now. So, you know, how much do we need to get whole teams back together? How do we do that? And a new way whilst maintaining an appropriate level of social distancing, how do we reconnect people through more distributed organizational networks? And how do we use both technology and physical working environments to enable these things to happen? So it's certainly not as simple as a full time office, full time home, but it's not as simple as organization or individuals as well. We need to dive more, much more deeply into the way that people actually do their work, who they work with, and then think about how we can enhance and optimize those opportunities through that much more diverse way of working.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:09:51.32] What's also interesting is what the employees want too and this I want to reference research from SHRM and this just came out and granted SHRM is generally more US focused than has a global perspective. But they their research found that half of workers wish to remain remote permanently, which isn't a surprise to me because remote can be really great. Sometimes it can be really lonely. But I do think employers are going to have to think about, as you said, like situationally with different employee groups or different populations. Think about can we have these employees remain remote or what does like a hybrid model look like for them coming to the office? Or do we want to just have everybody come back in? And all the time we might lose a large percentage of our workforce to other companies who are offering remote only?

Jon Ingham: [00:10:46.05] I completely agree. And again, I mean, I you know, I mentioned previously the a big part of being more strategic is greater prioritization. I think another key aspect is around differentiation and best fit. So to me, there are opportunities for organizations to arrive at different answers to that question. You know, it's a perfectly acceptable with the exception of the team and the network piece that I was just talking about, for some organizations to decide broadly that they want to be mainly virtual and others to want their people to come back to the office and subject to consultation with their staff and the nature of the

organization, nothing else. But and it's going to be quite interesting how organizations make that transformation, that transition, but certainly heading into the future, I think because people do like different things and that can be part of an organization's differentiation and its employer brand, as long as it's focused on providing a compelling environment for the sorts of people it wants to employ. There's enough, enough. There's enough people, I think, in all countries, you know, who who want a hybrid work style, who want to work in the office, who want to work at home. It's up to an organization to decide bearing in mind the expectations of the type of people it wants to employ, sort of pictures, but it doesn't necessarily have to focus on being able to employ everybody. You know, that's that's not a strategic approach. And so the organizations need to work together with that people and decide what the offer is going to be. But differentiation is good. You know, if an organization, if an organization thinks it can succeed better by doing something differently to what everybody else is doing, you know, that's that's a positive. We should we should look for those opportunities.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:12:52.15] I want to just point out one thing that you said. Talk to their people. It's not an edict from executive team which says we will all be in person or this is all going to happen. It should be a conversation and involve many different people's opinions and voices. And then, like you said, strategic conversations to determine what is the best decision for a group of people and for the business and for our people, or do we just not want to worry about that and and just move move forward with for what's best for our organization.

Jon Ingham: [00:13:28.31] Totally. And I should have said talk with, of course, rather than talk to. Absolutely. Ta ta ta ta. If we do far too much to people, but particularly issues which are all about people, it makes no sense to decide on their behalf.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:13:47.47] You mentioned a little bit ago about the last financial crisis and how we all said things were going to be different and we're going to make all these changes and then not a whole lot has changed. What do you think about. What's going to happen when we sort of get back to whatever this new normal is, do you think it's going to be different or is it going to be the same old?

Jon Ingham: [00:14:13.73] I think it's going to be different. As I said before, I think the change has been significant and deep and long enough to sort of to break with the inertia, which is always around and will tend to keep everything the same. Yeah, I think the new normal is going to be very different or the new normals, because, again, I think one shift is going to be the different organizations trying to do different things. I also agree with what you were saying earlier, that it's very difficult to predict what that is. You know, we are going to have to progress towards that new future in a fairly incremental, agile, consultative sort of way. But, you know, there are well, I mean, again, at covid hasn't necessarily completely changed things, it has broadly moved things in the direction we were already going. We understand what that direction is. You know, we know we are moving towards a more people centric, consultative and trust based, purposeful type of business. Now, there are there are lots of different specific aspects to that and lots of different opportunities within that broader shift. But I mean, the one I quite liked and I talk quite a lot about is well, I think a lot of people say that a big part of the transformation at the moment is sort of moving away from command and control.

Jon Ingham: [00:15:57.13] I tend not to say that because I think we actually left most organizations left command and control quite some time ago. But I do like this idea of trust and track. So not track and trace, but trust and track. So an organizational environment that understands that because we are now increasingly geographically distributed, it makes sense to be more organizationally distributed as well. And rather than trying to sort of centralize everything and direct things, we do have to accept we're now in an environment where the more open and. Enabling people to take more empowerment and to be more trusted and to do the things which they see as being appropriate at the point in the organization that they work in, and that that that's to me got to be the certainly one of the big aspects of the new whatever it's going to be.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:17:02.85] I like that, trust and track. I think that's brilliant. Brilliant. One of the things I wanted to make sure to chat with you about, because I think you're alluding to it like you talked about being agile and flexible and all these things. But what do you think this last year has taught us about change management? What are what are you hearing from clients and H.R. professionals that you're talking to?

Jon Ingham: [00:17:28.83] Well, certainly for the changes around the pandemic, we've certainly been a lot more agile. We have to be. And therefore we became more agile. And I think part of the task for H.R. is now ensuring that we do keep that approach as we sort of move through and beyond the pandemic. I think the need for greater people centricity, which I think also occurred during the pandemic because of the need to look after our people, I think we need to grab hold of that and ensure that we take that forward as well, and that it becomes not just a basis for a sort of reactive response to crisis management, but becomes the sort of core of the strategic future of our organizations as well. And then apart from those. Well, I mean, I think those shifts were happening already as well and perhaps linked to those. I think there was a growing understanding before the pandemic that the old traditional top down sort of waterfall based ways of doing change weren't being very successful. I've been calling it for quite some time the borg model of change, is rolling up to the organization and telling them that they're going to be assimilated in something and people don't generally like that. So certainly in the change programs I've been involved with over the last few years, I've always tried, rather than sort of managing, but accepting, acknowledging, and understanding will be resistance and then sort of trying to manage and mitigate that is doing everything I possibly could to ensure that there isn't resistance. I think by the time we've got people's backs up and sort of standing up and pushing back against the change, then we've largely lost the opportunity. So it's all of the stuff around consultation and communication and building trust and showing empathy and listening and all of those sort of things that we need to do in advance, because we know if we do those, then when we have to do a change, everything is going to be so much simpler.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:19:53.89] One of the things I think this last year has really pushed us in some good ways, but just in being more innovative and collaborative differently, you know, we're all dispersed and we've had to, I hate the term think outside the box, but we've really been tested, I guess, to work differently, run our businesses differently. Have you seen some examples by HR teams that you would want to share? I don't know if it's an employee experience example, but I was just thinking, like, what are some ways that, like innovation in H.R. that that you've seen that's really happened as a result of something that we're experiencing that's so crazy, like the good stuff that's maybe came out of that.

Jon Ingham: [00:20:42.80] Yeah, I think you said that there was one interesting example, actually, I was thinking about as I was responding to the last couple of questions, because we were talking about sort of agility in things. And I can probably extend that to employee experience as well. And I will say as a consultant these days, well, firstly, I do less consulting projects because there's a very there's a few other things I do as well. And also when I do consulting, it tends to be working with H.R. and business leaders to help them do whatever they need to do in the organization rather than do it to them. I, I sort of moved away from that approach quite early on in my career and so I can give you. Well, OK, so there was a an organization was working to help in the early stages of planning in HR transformation and partly due to the sorts of things I was talking about, they got really interested in the use of agile teams. And I do think that is a it's one of the biggest shifts in a lot of H.R., reorganization that's been going on for quite a few years. But again, possibly because of the increased push to agility during the pandemic, I think it's possibly even more topical now and that, yes, they were going to do what everybody seems to be doing these days, which is copying the Spotify model of guilds and chapters and tribes and all that sort of stuff.

Jon Ingham: [00:22:16.14] And and this is so this isn't me as a consultant transforming the H.R. function. This is me as a consultant trying to give them some sort of insights that might be useful to guide them in the most appropriate direction. And my suggestion to them was, was not just to do our job in H.R., because I just don't think copying sort of standards and models tends to work that well. And I mean, I think we've learned over the last couple of decades not just to copy the Elrich model. From what I see, most organizations that just implement business partners, incentive, excellence and things, because that's what it does tend not to do very well in doing it. And I think exactly the same thing applies to just doing agile because that's what everybody else is doing. So I suggested to them sort of moving towards a sort of horizontal teams where people are working cross-functionally rather than with individual functions. And some of those I think can be agile and some might be scrum and some might be kanban and some might be sort of traditional project management. I think that's, again, a much more strategic and appropriate way to undertake effective transformations. So and then on the employee expectation piece, again, I think focusing on customers works fairly well for agile teams in the rest of the business.

Jon Ingham: [00:23:53.75] I think in H.R., we have to be careful in just applying that type of approach because I think this whole shift towards employee experience is a really, really and people centricity is a really useful one. However, A, I don't think the employees always know what they'd like or what they need. So clearly, I mean, we talked about this before that we we need to do things with our employees rather than to employees. We need to consult and listen and so on. But we need to bring in our own insights about what the organization needs. And just because an employee is happy with that experience also doesn't necessarily mean that the organization is developing the capabilities it's going to succeed. So I think where organizations are moving towards agile and employee experience, let's design the organization together with our people. But let's maintain a level of accountability for deciding what the future of the organization is going to be. It's it's part of the reason why I really like the idea of product management rather than sort of more traditional, agile. The H.R. specialists perhaps take the role of product managers where they understand the needs and requirements and wants of employees and other stakeholders. But it's down to them to make the decisions, what they're going to do. So hopefully some of that was useful.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:25:31.79] I think it was great you're talking and I'm thinking about an interview we had previously where we talked to kind of about one of our guests point of view on employees and and his name is escaping me this very minute. But the conversation was about like products. So like external products, like if you're selling widgets or whatever, you have a product officer and a marketing team and a sales team to do all these things. And so his point of view is that H.R. really should kind of be the champion of the internal product, which is the human capital of the organization. And so he kind of considers himself more of a chief people officer. And so sometimes your internal customers as of your external customers, they don't know what they really need to be able to do to get the job done or what they what they really want. So sometimes there's a lot of stories that have to be told or dots that have to be connected. So it's it's an interesting concept I hadn't really thought of, but it's absolutely correct. And that's why you have these boots on the ground. These HR specialists in these places to kind of help organize the information so that you can put together resources and tell those stories and get them the support that they need, whatever that that may be.

Break: [00:26:53.39] Let's take a reset. This is Jessica Miller-Merrell and you were listening to the Workology podcast sponsored by Upskill and Ace the HR Exam. We're talking with John Ingham about strategic human capital management and change management.

Break: [00:27:09.51] Personal and professional development is essential for successful H.R. leaders. Join Upskill H.R. to access life training, community, and over a hundred on demand courses for the dynamic leader. H.R. recert credits available. Visit UpskillHR.com for more.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:27:25.68] I want to talk to you a little bit about Strategic HR Academy. You founded this last year. Can you talk to us a little bit about what this is, and why you did it, and how you work with organizations?

Jon Ingham: [00:27:38.37] Sure, thank you. Yeah, no, I'd love to. And so I mentioned previously that I don't do a huge amount of consulting anymore. And the, so, so I did four years as an HR director. I have been on that side of the of of things. But most of my career has been in consulting, starting with the consultancies where I'd go out to a project and spend a year on a particular thing with a particular client. Over the last few decades, I've been progressively moving towards a much more sort of consultative approach to my consultancy, but also sort of a broader portfolio. So like you I do a fair amount of other things, speaking and training and writing and so on. And when lockdown happened, well, in the consulting side was quite difficult as well. But the training in particular, all of my training was face to face. That all stopped. I did spend a couple of months doing some full day training courses on Zoom, which weren't as bad as you might imagine because, you know, you put more effort into engaging people. And I've got great content and people still enjoyed it. But it wasn't as good as Face-To-Face used to be. And actually we live in a digital world. A lot of organizations, in terms of their own learning academies have been moving towards more flipped approach for probably about a decade where the sort, of course, materials are available.

Jon Ingham: [00:29:25.41] But the real focus is on the chat and understanding the people's time is valuable. And when we get people together, we should be focusing on the most valuable stuff, which is the collaboration, the social learning, rather than just having people sitting, listening to somebody, even to me. So I've been thinking about doing something like my academy for a couple of years, but I suppose had faced the typical innovator's dilemma, which is that you need to sort of cannibalize what you've been doing in the past to do something new and therefore had never bit the bullet to stop what I was doing, take a couple of months off and to set up a new digital approach. And but we've locked down. That was sort of the decision was made for me. So that's what I did. And so the Digital Academy is it's a platform for all of the different learning sessions I've been running for the last 10 years in a flipped digital approach. And I'm very much focused on strategic HR. So there are other academies around the main ones, I think focusing sort of very much from a technology perspective or analytical perspective. I don't really do that. But if H.R. practitioners do want to become more strategic and they should want to become more strategic and I know we've been talking about that for decades as well, but I still don't see very much evidence of it.

Jon Ingham: [00:30:58.44] And indeed, I think there's a lot of confusion about what it means and how to do it. So if organizations want to take a strategic approach to basically anything that they do in HR, you know, so we go through organization design and performance management reward is my own personal favorite because I think that's the remaining area of HR that has still to be fundamentally transformed. And I've got some tentative thoughts at least about what that might look like. And so that's the academy. It's a set of courses, study groups, cohort's undertaking the courses and memberships as well. So you were asking what the difference is to the other stuff I do, and I am delighted where people just want to come in the academy and do a course. That's absolutely brilliant. But what I'm really focused on is enabling people to join as members of the academy where I can really get to know them, understand what their needs and opportunities are, give them access to the different courses which will be most appropriate towards their own particular areas of prioritization and guide them in that sort of consultative way that I've been talking about towards greater strategic impact and better business success. So, yeah, that's the academy, JonIngham.Academy. I hope some of your listeners will go and have a look.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:32:32.30] Yeah, well, I, I, I love the collaborative aspect. I mean, obviously, I love digital and I love in person, too. And I miss my friends. But I think there's so much value in online learning, not just watching Zoom calls and YouTube videos like actual collaboration and conversation. It can really broaden your point of view, your circle of people, which I think is really what we need in order to truly be strategic, we need to get outside our bubbles and connect with different ways of doing and different points of view. So your program offers those kind of things. And that's why I'm excited about what you're working on and how many HR people can help support in the transformation of their business.

Jon Ingham: [00:33:22.58] Thank you, Jessica. That's that's wonderful. And I do agree. You know, it's the diversity of people from different roles, different countries as well. I mean, we do have a fairly natural U.K. focus because that's where I am, and quite a few of the Academy members are from here as well. But we've got people from Australia and New Zealand and us and Canada and Middle East and South Africa. So it's a it's a very diverse group. And I completely agree. It's the it's the different insights and perspectives that that more distributed approach. The, you know, I mean, most of my training used to be in London. So, yeah, that tends to be a fairly diverse group of people anyway. But it's not the same. It's where you get that much more geographically distributed set of issues and ideas and being able to tap different things that are going

on in different parts of the world. Yeah, absolutely. That's definitely part of the benefits which I think that that digital approach provides.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:34:25.14] I am so excited for for what you're doing. It's good to catch up with you as well. Where can people go to learn more about Strategic HR Academy and the work that you're doing?

Jon Ingham: [00:34:35.78] The Academy is JonIngham.Academy. If they want to find out more about me, more generally at JonIngham.com. Jon is just J o n, no H. JonIngham.com, JonIngham.Academy. I'm JonIngham in LinkedIn, JonIngham at Twitter. People should be able to find me fairly quickly.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:34:56.87] Well, we'll link to your LinkedIn, your Twitter, and and the various resources that you've shared. Thank you so much for taking the time to chat with us today.

Jon Ingham: [00:35:05.42] Oh, I so appreciate it. Thank you. Thanks for the opportunity.

Closing: [00:35:08.57] Are you loving the Workology Podcast? Our Workology community reaches over six hundred thousand HR leaders every single month. Want to be a sponsor? Reach out to us at [Workology.com/advertising](https://workology.com/advertising).

Closing: [00:35:22.82] With such a large share of the global and U.S. workforce impacted by covid in the past year, everybody's being impacted. H.R. and company leaders have had to focus on planning for what we have yet to experience. We've been creating crisis response scenarios and finding our way through new territory and doing it all without a map. Our people are always going to be central to any future planning, and we have to think about how the rapid changes in the past year have impacted them. I know they've impacted me and my team. We also need to think about how we can help them move forward and ourselves. I really appreciate John's expertise and advice here in this interview. Thank you for joining the Workology Podcast sponsored by Upskill HR and ACE the HR Exam. This podcast is for the disruptive workplace leader who's tired of the status quo. You can just be tired and that's OK. This podcast is for you. My name is Jessica Miller-Merrell. Until next time viist [Workology.com](https://workology.com) to listen to all our previous Workology podcast episodes.