

Episode 279: The Role of the CHRO and Strategic Talent



Intro: [00:00:00.96] 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: [00:00:27.11] Welcome to the Workology Podcast sponsored by Upskill HR and ACE the HR Exam. Today's podcast, and this is my favorite series, folks, it is the CHRO series or Chief Human Resources Officer series. We dive into the CHRO role or Chief People Officer and talk about the roles and responsibilities that they play in dealing with human resources, as well as organizational development and implementing policies of change to help improve the overall efficiency of the company. Today, I'm joined by Marisa Peters. She is the Chief People Officer at VideoAmp, where she is responsible for creating strategic talent plans to support the candidate process and employee lifecycle. Marissa, welcome to the Workology Podcast.

Marisa Peters: [00:01:14.43] Hi, thanks for having me. Really glad to be here.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:01:17.54] Let's start with some background. You've been in HR roles going back to 2009. How did your experience and job titles evolve over time into your current role of Chief People, Officer?

Marisa Peters: [00:01:29.90] Yeah, that's a great question. I think years ago, if someone would have told me I would be in this position, I would have, you know, laughed or been shocked. I'm not sure which. But, you know, I got my start in working in the people's space from a program management sort of point of view when Sony Pictures was really reenvisioning the way they thought about people and talent at their organization. And so for me, it was really special to get to go through that change management process, establishing the systems, the practices, the ways of engaging and interacting with people within a studio environment. I moved out of that program management well into talent acquisition space, and it was around the same time at that our diversity and inclusion efforts were starting at the studio. So really got my hands and feet dirty in terms of getting to hire people at various levels and stages in their careers from very senior level to those, you know, fresh out of school and then work hand in hand with the executive leadership at the studio to think about how we're bringing people with unique and varied backgrounds and experiences to make the the workforce all the more vibrant and indicative of our customer base on a global level. I oversaw talent acquisition for a number of years and then moved to an internal facing role as the the space of talent management was coming on the scene. And so in that space, got to focus on internal mobility and the way

that we thought about having conversations mainly with our employees, that would be indicative of those that we would have originally had with candidates outside of the company.

Marisa Peters: [00:03:15.37] And so that was a really special experience for me to learn about strategic talent, planning, succession, internal bench strength. Gaps that we had in the business that were really going to hold us back from accomplishing our business strategy. And so that was that was really special for me to see the moments where people would now look at talent inside the organization differently than they would have had we not been investing in those consistent talent management practices. And then I moved into a business partnership role. And at that point I moved over to Amazon and I got to oversee the end to end experience through the lens of the business and the business that Amazon was that of their digital media and entertainment businesses. From doing that role for a couple of years, spanning a number of different individual business segments within Amazon, I moved out of the larger corporate environment into that that was more of a later stage startup. So moved to an e-commerce business called Adam Tickets, that was a digital movie and event ticketing business and spent a couple of years there before then coming over to VideoAmp into the Chief People Officer role. So these last two opportunities have been ones where I've been able to learn a tremendous amount but apply some of the best and next practices of larger organizations on a much shorter and condensed time, timeline, excuse me, and then also at a more rapid pace than you might find some other organizations able to to move and apply these types of practices and and real changes that they're looking to see within their workforce.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:04:53.86] So how big is, how many employees, what's the company size of a VideoAmp right now? Because you joined them in November of 2019.

Marisa Peters: [00:05:02.02] That's right. I joined in November of 2019 and we, at that point, were just over two hundred employees. And seeing tremendous growth from a business standpoint, we did go through restriction of the workforce around the pandemic and that actually has helped position us for tremendous growth opportunity based on where we sit right now. So we're just shy of two hundred employees and looking to scale this year, you know, adding another third of our workforce as we continue to grow. We'll be looking to add that by the summer time and then continue our growth trajectory thereafter.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:05:45.25] What's interesting, because you joined November, end of 2019, of course, we hit the pandemic and it was just the three short months later for you. What was the experience for you as a new employee at the company, particularly in H.R. leadership? I feel like the relationships maybe weren't there new with executives and the employees and you're rolling out a lot of new changes quickly. Everybody is in response to covid-19.

Marisa Peters: [00:06:11.14] Yeah, that's right. And I'm incredibly grateful that I had those early months in person in a pre covid world to be able to learn. I think we can learn so much faster and in different environments, certainly in person. And now I think we are where we've learned to adapt and adjust to everyone being in this in-home displaced environment. But yes, you're exactly right, Jessica, where, you know, fresh into the organization with a challenging and yet also inspiring mission ahead of us to then be

faced with a pandemic. Certainly is unique. The other piece that was unique for me is I also joined the organization seven months pregnant and welcoming our third child. And so I also was, you know, fresh out of welcoming that new life to our family and jumped back in to the organization, as many people did, regardless of personal circumstances, to really help support the crisis and how we were managing our response to ensure that our workforce was safe, that we were productive, that we were holding true to the things that matter most to our culture and our success, but really adapting and shifting that to a virtual or in home nation wide experience for people. So that was, it was absolutely unique to go through reduction force, to go through changing our comp model, where we shifted from, you know, what was known, implemented pay cuts, et cetera, like many organizations. And thankfully, we're able to offset that with some additional instantly vested equity for employees at that time. But it was a real emphasis on making sure. We were actively listening to people and adjusting our plans and addressing their needs as near to real time as we possibly could,

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:07:59.69] What is recovery or a return to some semblance of normalcy look like for you guys? I mean, obviously, things are changing and moving very quickly. But is everybody staying remote? Like, where kind of, where are you guys at in terms of when when things start to open up in the future?

Marisa Peters: [00:08:19.17] Yeah, I think there's a lot on the horizon. It gives us great hope. One being, you know, what we're we're learning about in terms of the vaccine and the protections that that's affording people to return to as their point that sense of sense of normalcy. I don't think we'll ever know the the world as it was before the pandemic. So it's really how do we continue to live and thrive in this post covid world? And for us, that is absolutely going to be a blend of in-person and flexibility to meet people where they're at. You know, we pride ourselves on being a people first organization and that it's about optimizing our workforce to drive tremendous business results. And within that, we understand that it isn't one size fits all for each employee, for each person at this stage of life, the stage of their career and also the stage of where they're at and bonding with the pandemic and the experience that they have had through the pandemic. And so we're thinking about ways that as some choose to return in person, that we continue to keep a level playing field so that there isn't an in versus out group, that your your productivity, your impact is not jeopardized if you elect to not be in person as we sort of wean ourselves back into an in-person work environment. But we will we will see a blend. We aren't making the choice to say where we're staying in a virtual environment forever or we're going to only allow people that will work in our office space as far as what we expect of people coming to the organization. So we we're looking to capitalize on the silver linings of the pandemic to really drive toward a mission that existed long before, which was how do we really challenge and realize the most optimal workplace experience for our people and those that that they spend their time with outside of their their normal work hours to help them live holistic, full lives that make them proud and also see that the company was an integral part of that that time of life for them.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:10:34.37] What's, I guess I want to, I'm going to go ahead and shift directions because I feel like this. I feel like we can talk about this for, I don't know, forever. It's something we're all thinking about and things are changing so quickly. But I want to shift directions just for a second and talk about skills and experiences. And, you know, you have a lot of experience at large companies, very large companies working in talent management, human resources, talent acquisition. And then you have switched gears and now you're working in a smaller kind of more startup situation. But I'd love to hear from you with

that vast experience. What you think are requirements like skills and experience wise for someone who's going into a position like yours as the CHRO?

Marisa Peters: [00:11:22.28] Is a great question. I think fundamentally, I don't believe there's sort of one size fits all for the optimal CHRO or Chief People Officer. And I do think at the core, regardless of what business you might work in, that being innately curious and passionate about what the business is and does the problem that it solves for our customers needs to be at the forefront. So I think that that business sophistication, business acumen, that hunger to deeply understand this strategy is critical as a starting point. Next, I would say is what data are you using and what data are you not using that you need to seek out that will help inform the ways that you most strategically impact the people and culture and by therefore the business success and results that you're responsible for enabling. And so I think that comes in a number of ways. One is just understanding the financial model and the fundamentals of the business. The other is setting up infrastructure that allows data about your people to come to the forefront. And that's a blend of active listening through, whether it's through focus groups or one on ones, through probing and understanding or through hard data in the form of metrics and analytics that move beyond the fundamentals [00:12:49.58] of a treccian and [00:12:51.38] tenure and composition by level, but really into the DNA of the organization of how are we seeing people move in progress throughout their career based on certain levels and types of skills, how are we viewing diversity, equity and inclusion through the lens of the makeup of our workforce and then the experiences that people may have in different ways based on the systems we set up? So we touched a little bit on listening.

Marisa Peters: [00:13:19.16] Lastly, I would say is an immense amount of creativity. I think, you know, part of what I enjoy most about this work is that we if I believe if I'm doing my job well, I'm using my my knowledge and my instinct to play in the grey. And often I think the H.R. space can get stuck in what is black and white, what might be sometimes compliance oriented, or sometimes can be perceived as policing and enforcing certain rules of the workplace, which are certainly important that I believe should the creativity should be more important about what problems are we trying to solve for the business. How do we help to draw our leaders and individuals to the organization, to our function, and in that we help them solve the problems they're faced with in a way that's different and ideally more optimal than if they'd gone about it on their own. So for me, really, it's those those three pieces, business acumen, deep fundamental understanding and requirement of data driven decision making, actively listening and being creative about what you're you're bringing in terms of the solutions that you you help enable for the organization that you're at.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:14:38.24] Perfect. Every HR person that's listening right now, this is your list of personal development and things that you should be focusing on for yourself as you move throughout your career. And that either is finding resources and training programs or career development internally in the organization or going outside your organization and learning more about these areas. I also agree with you, like this is the future of a Chief Human Resources Officer and how they can support the organization is having these three areas like dialed in.

Marisa Peters: [00:15:16.40] It's something that I think if someone would have told me in the beginning, you know, these are the three things to go after. I don't know if it would have made even as much sense to me,

but these are absolutely like on a daily basis, they take different shape and form. But it's what I draw upon most regularly.

Break: [00:15:50.49] Let's take a reset. This is Jessica Miller-Merrell, and you were listening to the Workology Podcast, and we are continuing our conversation with Marisa Peters about the roles and responsibilities of the CHRO role. This is part of our CHRO series on the Workology Podcast, and it is sponsored by Upskill HR and ACE the HR Exam.

Break: [00:16:12.12] Personal and professional development is essential for successful leaders, join upscale H.R. to access life , community, and over one hundred on demand courses for the dynamic leader. H.R. recert credits available. Visit UpskillHR.com for more.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:16:28.58] I want to switch gears again and go back to the company and talk about what you guys are doing at the organization in terms of career growth and development for your employees.

Marisa Peters: [00:16:42.16] Sure, so we've spent a tremendous amount of time investing in what we believe to be best for the individual first, and by getting that right, we believe that the business also wins as a result. Sometimes I think organizations go after it in the flip, what can we gain versus what can the person gain? And so for us, this has taken form and what we think about as performance development rather than top down management or something that is forced upon people. This is that opportunity to grow and develop and have a sense of understanding where you are today, not only through your own self reflection, but through the eyes of your direct leader. So at our company, we call it Project Accelerate, really about accelerating the growth not only of the business, but also of our people. And so it's broken down into into four main parts. First is the reflection, and we call it a stay reflection, where we ask individuals to take some time, make some space to look back at their most proud accomplishments, to think about what their leader could do to better support them in their role today, that if they had a limited resources, what would help them accomplish even more in the role that they have? And what are those opportunities where they wish they could have done better, where they could learn, grow, lean in, maybe stretch beyond their comfort zone, and so by doing a self reflection and were able to capture their thoughts.

Marisa Peters: [00:18:20.28] Of course, documented in one centralized system. And then we ask their direct leader or their manager to do the same thing about the individual. So that then prompts a conversation to talk through it, make sure we align, ask questions and deeply understand where their performance sits today. And then it's all about the so what. Great to talk about it. Great to recognize in a line. Very important to have that. But it's really about what we do with it as a result. And so we then move into career growth planning, establishing tangible, specific, time bound plans to truly accelerate someone's plan forward. That may include things like on the job experiences where the the leader is able to bring those growth opportunities to the daily responsibilities for the person. It may include increased exposure and visibility to other stakeholders within the business, aligning a mentor, connecting with an outside group, serving as a subject matter expert, whether internally or externally. And then lastly, around the educational experiences, if someone's looking to develop deeper technical acumen for their domain, for example, what would that look

like? Is there a particular certification class leadership development management, one on one, if you're a first time leader, so on and so forth, and those are captured in the form of those plans.

Marisa Peters: [00:19:48.63] And then the fourth component is how do we link our rewards and recognition signals to the behaviors and results that people are driving day in and day out. So that comes in the form of a compensation review, but it ladders into our performance driven culture all under this umbrella of Project Accelerate. And our intention is that it works like a flywheel. We do this more formally twice a year, it's a semi-annual cycle. However, this framework is used to create near-term, even more spontaneous interactions, not just between a leader and their direct report, but within the peer cohort as well, to further a culture where people share perspective and input real time so that we all can lift and rise in our careers together versus, versus some other similarly competitive environments. But where it can be about rising to the detriment of those that are around you, this is really more how do we help collectively the organization and each other rise to our greatest potential and the belief that there's enough to go around for everyone versus forcing a certain distribution where only a select few have that opportunity to rise and grow.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:21:05.16] I love this transparency. I think this is so key and you're tying that to business outcomes, but you're also giving people the space to be able to really think about what they want and then have conversations not just with their direct, with their direct manager but other people within the organization. That's awesome. I wanted to also ask on the vein of transparency around maybe program data of how this transparency has positively impacted your employees and teams. How has it helped the business?

Marisa Peters: [00:21:38.91] So transparency is fundamental for us if we as a business exist because we believe everyone in the world should have access to the data and information that informs their business outcomes, their daily behaviors as customers, how could we not be transparent with our employees in the same fashion? So we run a semi annual survey that we call our people Culture and Climate Survey. And my my team administers that. And as we look at the results of that information, we share quite openly where we stand not only from an employee engagement perspective, but also from the perspective of being quite open about the the places that we still have more work to do. We have more work to do in the the way that we're creating a culture where people feel they can belong and really be themselves. We are working on improving the time that we spend together, the frequency of meetings, the effectiveness of our meetings, the way that we're helping people speak up and share their voice. And so while people may know experientially where that sits, there's power in knowing where the collective organization responded and helping people see what were they an outlier in terms of their perspective, or was this resounding in terms of something that we heard across all functions, departments and more broadly across the organization. So it's really important to us that the data we hear from our workforce is shared back.

Marisa Peters: [00:23:21.66] The same in terms of, you know, I touched briefly upon a compensation review. We want people to understand how they're being paid, the signals that our compensation and our investments are sending to them in terms of motivating continual high performance or course correcting when performance isn't exactly as we would hope. We don't want to have a workforce where there are surprises or more so where they feel they have to go around and and on like a reconnaissance mission to try and figure out what's going on, where we really have worked hard, especially through the pandemic, to have

a frequent, ongoing and trustworthy dialogue with our workforce that not only enables our values, but enables people to just put their shoulders down and know that the company is going to shoot him straight. They don't they don't have to go on a hunt for it. They can they can count on and rely upon us for that.

Marisa Peters: [00:24:15.63] I wanted to talk to you, Marisa, about awards for best places to work. Now, VideoAmp has been recognized by Ad Age as the best place to work. And they ranked number ten and also Built In L.A. listed them as number one in 2021. Previous awards for VideoAmp include Inc. Magazine ranking them or listing them as the best place to work in 2019 and again by Built In L.A. in 2020. You also worked at another company, Atom Tickets at at the position or at the role of Head of People and Culture, and they had other best place to work awards. So I feel like you have some experience in this area. How do you see these awards as far as their impact on employer brand culture, retention and so on?

Marisa Peters: [00:25:08.29] I should start first by saying, you know, the the recognition that both VideoAmp has received and certainly Atom Tickets as well, is as a result of not going after the awards, but going after the culture and the experience, the benefits and perks that we afford each of our employees. So it's about getting that right and motivating toward what's mattered most for each of these organizations. And they've been different at each company. What I think is important and what has earned the noteworthy recognition, the award recognition is that through the lens of our employees and then through the other organizations that would be considered in our peer cohort, it's recognized as being leading. It's recognized as making a real difference for them in a way that is distinctive. And so in particular, our focus on being ranked number 10 of all of Ad Age and then and then the same in terms of coming in, in that number one spot for Built In L.A. this year, which we're tremendously humbled and honored to receive, is that this is really about celebrating our employees. They needed to respond, in particular in Ad Age our employees all responded to a survey about the experience that they have. So it's an unvarnished, anonymous way for our employees to speak about how the company helps to serve them. And that's what landed us that position. So I view this as a way to recognize our workplace internally. We have celebration for it.

Marisa Peters: [00:26:48.73] But it's not just about celebrating my team or the company. It's about celebrating each and every person that makes up the fabric of our culture and the experience we have. External facing I do believe it's really important to send that message to people who are thinking about the next best destination in their career. And so if we can be leading in that space, number one, it helps give a sense of what that true, authentic experiences that they could expect when they're part of the organization. The other is to really shape and influence what the the workplace or employee experience looks like as a means to hopefully inspire and set the new status quo for other organizations. So my hope is that what is noteworthy for our company today becomes the norm across others and that we continue to evolve and push the limits in terms of how organizations truly can help the people that we, our intention is that the value that's exchanged is is exponentially greater for the employees taking that value away from the company versus what the company gets to gain and the value that it gains from the people being there. So our hope is that that that is the case that that we're giving back more than we're gaining. And I think these awards are there one signal and one sign that that we're moving closer toward that end mission and goal that we have.

Marisa Peters: [00:28:19.47] Well, Marisa, thank you so much for taking the time to talk with us on this podcast. Where can people go to learn more about you and then the work that you're doing at VideoAmp?

Marisa Peters: [00:28:31.47] Sure. So LinkedIn is always a great destination. I'll post different articles or different happenings at the company on my own page. You can certainly follow VideoAmp and our experiences there, as well as dig into our blog that focuses on our culture, recognizes our employees, were also transparently sharing our journey about our people strategy and insights and analytics function. And so I would encourage you to follow along with Min Park on my team in terms of the work that she is doing there, as well as Creative Checky and the work that she's doing around employee experience. So we're sharing about, you know, the times that we stumble on, the times that we win. Quite transparently for the organization and would just welcome anyone reach out, ask questions, feel free to shoot me a note on LinkedIn, happy to be a part of others journey if there's ever an opportunity to share or connect more so. So thank you for having me. It's really been a pleasure to connect and look forward to to learning more about this community in the future.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:29:35.61] I love the transparency. I love the willingness to be open and share experiences the good as well as the bad. So thanks again.

Marisa Peters: [00:29:43.97] My pleasure. Thanks for having me.

Closing: [00:29:45.77] Are you loving the Workology Podcasts? Our Workology community reaches over 600,000 H.R. leaders every single month. Want to be a sponsor? Reach out to us at [Workology.com/advertising](https://workology.com/advertising).

Closing: [00:29:59.92] There have been so many changes, so many changes in the last decade, heck, the last 12 months, but as HR leaders, we've never lost our focus on our people and our teams are now being formed around an executive level role like the CHRO or Chief People Officer who are more connected to the strategy and operations of the overall business. This means that in this leadership position, this person has a larger role in the organization's culture, building change management and technology selection. I appreciate Marisa taking the time to share with us her experience today. Thank you for joining the Workology Podcast sponsored by Upskill HR and ACE the HR Exam. This interview on CHROs is part of CHRO series on Workology. For those of you who are unfamiliar, the Workology Podcast is the podcast for the disruptive workplace leader who's tired of the status quo. I'm Jessica Miller-Merrell. Until next time, visit [Workology.com](https://workology.com) to listen to all our previous Workology Podcast episodes.