

Episode 285: The Role of the CHRO and DEI With Whitney Bennett



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: [00:00:27.21] Welcome to the Workology Podcast sponsored by Upskill HR and ACE The HR Exam. Today's podcast is part of a series on the Workology Podcast focused on the roles and responsibilities of the Chief Human Resources Officer, also known as the CHRO, also known as the VP of Talent and Culture or Chief People Officer. This is an executive level role that deals with managing human resources, as with organizational development and implementing policies of change to help improve the overall efficiency of the company. Sometimes these policies include diversity, equity and inclusion. I'd like them to be all the time. We need more DEI in our lives. Today, I'm joined by Whitney Bennett. She's the VP of Talent and Culture at CallRail. With a decade of experience and human resources. Whitney is passionate about fostering a diverse and inclusive culture where people are excited about the work they do and the teams they are working with. Whitney, welcome to the Workology Podcast.

Whitney Bennett: [00:01:32.73] Thank you so much for having me.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:01:34.80] Let's talk about your background. You've been in H.R. at the management level for almost 10 years. How has your role evolved over time into the VP of Talent and Culture with CallRail?

Whitney Bennett: [00:01:46.05] So I have always been in a startup environment. I think it's a really great way to grow and kind of try a bunch of different hats and figure out what you like. I was in a company and an admin role and they didn't have any HR. We were about 50 people. I saw a need. I asked if I could do it and they said sure. So I got certified with my PHR and I joined SHRM, and from there was promoted to H.R. manager, then H.R. director, and I left that company and moved over to CallRail to be an H.R. director, and about a year in I was promoted at CallRail to the VP of Talent and Culture.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:02:28.29] So I wanted to ask you, too, about skills and experiences. We talked a little bit about the CHRO role, your journey stepping into a Chief Human Resource Officer type role. But I

wanted to ask you about absolute requirements for the CHRO role, thinking about maybe somebody who's just starting out or is looking for kind of their checklist of skills and experiences that they need for the future to step into that position.

Whitney Bennett: [00:02:57.75] Sure. I think adaptability and empathy, honestly, are some of the most important requirements. I think H.R. in media has kind of been made into this caricature of this person who just makes everything hard and is the police and love policies and documentation. And I love a good policy and I love documentation. But you've got to be able to see the person behind all of it. And I think if 2020 taught us anything, we've got to be adaptable and we can't be married to any one thing. We have to be able to change quickly.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:03:37.71] I love that and I feel like we're kind of in this situation right now, like in flux, right? Where we are a year into the pandemic, we continue to have to be flexible. We don't know what's going to happen in 60 days, 90 days, six months, a year and a half. Not that we knew all of that before. I mean, it's just more real now because everything's been turned upside down.

Whitney Bennett: [00:04:00.03] Yes, I thought I was going to be home for two weeks. That was a year ago. It's been the longest two weeks of my life. So we've got to be able to change things around and kind of meet people where they are, especially during this year where I think mental wellness was really kind of suffering for people.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:04:18.42] How does the CHRO role change how company leadership works with H.R. or vice versa?

Whitney Bennett: [00:04:24.60] So I'm a big believer that the way the rest of the leadership team interacts with the head of H.R. will inform how the rest of the company perceives the HR team as a whole. When it's done well, I think H.R. can be a really excellent partner for the leadership team and help them navigate the challenges of a growing business. They can make sure that people are thought of with all the decision, because a lot of people are just thinking about the business, they're not thinking of the human aspect of it. And if it doesn't go that way, it's typically a lot of cleanup for managers. And honestly, H.R., if you don't approach decisions kind of holistically.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:05:06.40] Absolutely. So everything's crazy. We're all in flux. Tell us about CallRail's shift to remote working. What does that look like for you guys? And then what has been the biggest challenge?

Whitney Bennett: [00:05:18.91] Yeah, so like I said, we thought we would be home for two weeks, our CEO wanted to say four weeks and the email he was sending out to the company and I was like, no, no, no, you can't do that, it will scare people. So, clearly HR people are fallible as well cause I was super wrong about that, we really leaned into the aspect of working remotely and focusing on mental health. We had employees that were completely overwhelmed, some that were sheltering in place alone. And we wanted to make sure they had everything they needed to make their home office comfortable. So we introduced a home office type in. We also continually reminded people about our EAP. My team would just randomly pick people to check in with. We made sure that people knew it was OK to step away and take a minute. And we also hope that several virtual events throughout the year. So we could still kind of get that engagement and camaraderie with people. And then as far as challenges for me, I would say I am not someone who loves working from home. I like to have kind of those drive by interactions with people. I feel like that's how I keep my pulse on the organization and what's happening. So I've really had to adapt to building kind of breaks and my schedule just to randomly check in on people and not have people be scared that H.R. is randomly checking in on them and nothing is wrong. Just want to see how things are going.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:06:48.97] Isn't that weird? But I love that you're doing that. Quick story, so and one of my last corporate HR roles, I, I was new and I'm a social person. I'd like to walk the floor and meet people like that's, like you, incredibly important to me. And so it was like my first or second day in this new job. And I walked into the call center floor where we had a big group of people for inside sales. And I started talking to one of the managers and introduced myself to all the people and just chatted it up as I do. And it felt a little weird. But, you know, I was just nice. And then I went back to my office and got ready to leave for the rest of the day. And I found out after I got to know this manager, it had been, I don't know, three or four months. He informed me that the only time that they saw H.R. ever was when they were handing them a box to be.

Whitney Bennett: [00:07:38.75] Oh!

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:07:40.06] So the fact that I walked up and talked to the manager first and then started just chatting with everybody cause this huge amount of panic and stress, and then he felt comfortable to tell me after he realized that's not the kind of HR person I am, but I just can't imagine ever being that kind of HR person like ugh.

Whitney Bennett: [00:08:00.22] No, I don't ever just want anyone above, like, be a person. That's awful.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:08:08.00] Yeah, so I love that you're making time for it, and I do think it's important, like, you know, just even if it's like a quick slack chat or teams chat or hopping on to like a managers meeting real quick just to say hi. These are all things that a little things that we can do that don't cost any money. Just a little bit of time on our calendar.

Whitney Bennett: [00:08:27.17] For sure. And I think, to your point, I super clarify when I put time on people's calendar. Nothing is wrong. I just want to talk to you and check in and see how you're doing. Everything's OK. You still have a job. Because I think especially during a pandemic, it was like, oh, why are they talking to me?

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:08:42.62] Yeah. And I just read a tweet from somebody from Huffington Post. They reffed a group of employees and they invited them all to a Zoom meeting and like the guests were to get in the Zoom meetning is like spring is sprung and then everybody who got invited to the meeting got reffed. So that's not the kind of experience that we want, but this is the kind of stuff that gets shared in the media. It was all over the news, tweeted on Twitter, and then everybody thinks that our folks are bad people. And this is that the thing that we'd like to do?

Whitney Bennett: [00:09:14.22] I feel like probably no one asked that HR person if it was a good idea to do it. No way. I would hope not.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:09:21.98] I would think no, that, that somebody else made the decision and wasn't thinking about how people would feel, the kind of eyebrows it might raise, stress it would cause. And they're not thinking about what it's like for you and me who are are going back to our organizations. And we pop into a meeting and everybody is like, holy cow, what's happening? HR is here.

Whitney Bennett: [00:09:45.30] Yeah, it's really hard to come back from those and not be seen as the police when all we really want to do is partner with everyone to make the organization great.

Break: [00:09:54.33] Let's take a reset. This is Jessica Miller-Merrell, and you are listening to the Workology Podcast sponsored by Upskill HR and ACE the HR Exam. We're talking about the role of the CHRO and how DEI interplays with that with our guest, Whitney Bennett.

Break: [00:10:13.45] Personal and professional development is essential for successful HR leaders. Join Upskill HR to access life training, community, and over a hundred on demand courses for that dynamic leader. HR recert credits available. Visit UpskillHR.com for more.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:10:29.47] I want to shift gears a little bit and talk about diversity and inclusion, it's top of mind right now, and I'm so happy that it is. I wanted to ask you about some of the things that you're doing in your work and creating and implementing DNA initiatives with CallRail.

Whitney Bennett: [00:10:45.82] Yeah. So diversity, equity and inclusion was something we had started leaning into in late 2019. We had committed to everyone in our org that they would go through a think inclusively course and we would kind of build on that. We got through maybe two or three rounds of employees and then the pandemic happened. So we put everything on pause because we thought we would be back in no time. I thought we were only going to be gone for two weeks. And then the social justice movements of the summer started and we knew we just couldn't wait any longer. So we're fortunate at CallRail that we already had a great culture manager in place. I think that along with the fact that we were already working on DE and I gave us a great foundation to build on. We really leaned into being an anti-racist organization kind of right away. And I think maybe we went too fast at first and really overwhelmed people, I think in a time that was already really mentally heavy and possibly didn't have necessarily a clear direction. So we leaned into listening to our employees. We got some feedback. And now in 2021, we really honed in on creating a foundation of psychological safety. And once we feel like we're good there, then we'll continue to kind of build and expand on that foundation.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:12:14.41] I love that you guys have a lot of self-awareness of what your employees and the organization like, what's their comfort level.

Whitney Bennett: [00:12:23.35] Yeah, it's hard. And we were putting, we're a very introverted organization and we were putting people in group settings and asking them to talk about really loaded subjects. And I think we just needed to pull back a little bit and get people to the safe place where they felt like it was OK to have those more public conversations with each other.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:12:44.80] Can you talk a little bit more about the concept of psychological safety in the context of maybe your black employees, as well as maybe other either protected groups or just groups of employees who were just not feeling safe yet to to have these conversations?

Whitney Bennett: [00:13:02.47] So I think kind of everyone knows the benefits of having a diverse workforce. A variety of perspectives leads to a variety of different ideas. There's increased productivity and increased creativity. However, I don't think you can really reap the benefits if your employees don't feel safe in voicing their opinions and sharing the ideas. And it was clear the summer after the murders of on that Aubrey and Brianna Taylor and George Floyd and the resulting social justice movements that our black employees were hurting. And we wanted to make sure CallRail was not adding to that hurt. And I think something that was really eye opening for our organization, we're a slack organization, and obviously we use that a ton more now that we're in the pandemic and all remote. One of our black employees just said, you know, here's my experience and here's how I've interacted with the police or here's how I feel like in the workplace I've been discriminated against, not necessarily at CallRail, just in life. And I think it really led to a lot of eye opening for our white employees and then for our black employees that helped make them feel safe because there was a lot of back and forth on flack about different experiences.

Whitney Bennett: [00:14:25.39] And we really want to build an organization where people feel comfortable bringing themselves as they are to work and speaking up and disagreeing with people. And you can't do that

if you don't have psychological safety. And I think, you know, as an organization, we don't always get it right. I posted a blog and our company blog that's just internal, probably right after the murder of George Floyd. And I maybe said like a one line about our black employees are going through something right now that we could never imagine. And people kind of came to me and were like, you need to name what we're going through. Like, don't lump it in with everything else everyone else is going through. So I made that mistake and I haven't made it again. But I think being able to make mistakes and kind of grow. You know, we continue to lean into that, and I think that's really important for our black employees and our other minority employees to feel safe that we continue to try.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:15:28.37] What an amazing gift that your employees gave, your black employees gave others at your organization to be open and sharing exactly how they're experiencing. It makes me a little bit emotional because they do not have to and they should not have to. But the fact that they were willing to, I think, says a lot about the culture at your company, which is, I mean, fantastic. So, I mean, I just love it. It's they didn't have to do that.

Whitney Bennett: [00:15:59.88] No, it was it was extremely moving and I think our culture manager, who is also black and has been with us for, gosh, four or five years, right after everything happened, she actually sent an email to the whole company and it was like, here's my calendar, here's my schedule. Anyone that wants to talk to me about what's going on in the news right now or my experience or why this is a problem, like please put time on my calendar. And I think some people would say, OK, well, that's her job. She's the Culture Manager. It's not her job at all. No one asked her to do that. And I think the mental burden of going through everything that was happening but then offering herself to the organization, we just have so many people, I think, trying to get it right at CallRail, and that's something I really appreciate about the people that I'm surrounded with.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:16:53.45] One of the other things I wanted to make sure that we talked about today was employee resource groups and the ERG programs that you guys have. Can you kind of walk us through employee resource groups, how they work at CallRail and then any changes that you guys have made as of recent? I mean, it could be related to the pandemic, could be related to just the the Black Lives Matter movement. But I would just I think a lot of people are searching for conversations like this podcast and trying to find out what are others doing because we're really remote. We're not going into conferences right now. So I want to hear from you about what you guys are doing and what's changed.

Whitney Bennett: [00:17:32.48] Yeah. So we have too really engaging employee resource groups at CallRail. We're about two hundred employees. So I think two groups feels right right now. We have a women's circle and then we have a black and brown group. Our culture manager did a great job of solidifying these groups, but I think something that really makes employee resource group work is group leaders and employees who want to be involved and who have a passion for kind of what they're bringing to the organization. Our ERGs have really focused on educating employees about different cultures. We obviously just had Black History Month in February and our Black and Brown Group hosted several sessions about celebrating the triumph of black people and amazing things that have come out of their communities, because I think so often we are focused on the struggles of minority and the struggles of black people. And they were like, no, we've done amazing things. Let us educate you on that. And in 2021, the leadership team engaged more with the ERGs,

which is something that I think really important as well. None of ERG leaders were managers, so they were missing out on a lot of the business things that were happening that would help inform kind of the direction of ERGs.

Whitney Bennett: [00:18:57.74] So now they both have executive sponsors and also meet quarterly with myself, with the CEO and the CFO. I really think it helps tremendously to be able to partner with various groups to help with messaging, education and overall engagement. And I would love to take all the credit. But honestly, you know, with our culture managers, it's the super involved employees. They are putting themselves out there and being really vulnerable. And I had a meeting with them asking them, how much time do you think you can commit to this? Because you're doing this on a voluntary basis. And they told us, you know, two hours a week is what we need. And so I went to the managers and said, are you comfortable with them taking this out of their regular schedule? And they all were. So I think it's also important that they get the time and the space to do it within their regular schedule because they are adding so much value to the organization.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:19:56.93] I just want to call out that and repeat what you said, that the ERGs have executive sponsors. And I think that is key. But there isn't a manager who's leading the ERG. It's employee driven, but they have the support of somebody on that executive leadership team. That's amazing.

Whitney Bennett: [00:20:15.35] Yes. And I think, honestly, that was our mistake in the beginning when the ERGs were originally set up. It was all employee led and leadership didn't know what they were doing. They didn't know what leadership we're doing. And now it's kind of what do you think you can help us with? How can I help you? And it made it so much more impactful, I think.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:20:36.59] Another question I wanted to ask you in recruiting and hiring and screening and so on, what do you think the first step is, if you would recommend an HR leader to maybe help eliminate some of the bias that's happening in in the hiring process?

Whitney Bennett: [00:20:54.69] Make sure you have someone that oversees the process for all departments. So, in our case, we have an internal recruiter and make sure every candidate goes through the same process. If Engineer A takes a test before meeting with the hiring team, then engineer B should as well. You can't ever fast track someone just because they are a referral, because also in your organization, if you feel like you have a diversity problem and you look around and you see a bunch of white people, you're probably going to get referred a bunch more white people. So you need to make sure that you're not just fast tracking those referrals. Also, you should be asking really similar questions to the candidates and what I believe everyone does hire the best person for the job based on the candidates given. I think people really need to look at the pipeline and see if they're happy with what's coming in. And if not, really work on expanding your efforts with getting the word out about hiring and post on a lot of different job boards. Don't just post on LinkedIn and then kind of walk away from it.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:22:02.38] This is such great information and I feel like you're giving us culture. We got the ERGs, now we have recruiting and hiring. It kind of, it's not just one program for one thing. It is a holistic approach, really, that one needs to take to diversity and inclusion.

Whitney Bennett: [00:22:25.15] Yeah, and I think that's what I really appreciate about CallRail calling it talent and culture. It's not just human resources. They really are concerned about the full employee experience. And even if somebody doesn't stay at CallRail forever, we really want to create a community of supporters for CallRail internally and externally.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:22:45.34] I love that, and I thank you so much for willing to take the time to chat with us today on the podcast. Where can people go to learn more about you and then the work that you guys are doing on your HR team with CallRail?

Whitney Bennett: [00:23:01.60] We have a great website CallRail.com. Careers are there. Our blogs are there. We have some excellent videos and then people can find me on LinkedIn as Whitney Bennett.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:23:12.71] Awesome. Well, thank you so much, Whitney. I really appreciate you chatting with us today.

Whitney Bennett: [00:23:17.05] Thanks Jessica.

Closing: [00:23:18.28] Are you loving the Workology Podcast? 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: [00:23:32.57] It's really interesting to delve into how a role of the CHRO whose experience more closely connects them to the strategy and operations of the overall business. I love this. I love how the CHRO is working with the company leadership, especially around diversity and inclusion and those business partnerships. I appreciate Whitney taking the time to share her knowledge and experience with us today on this podcast. And 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 is tired of the status quo. I know that's to you. This is Jessica Miller-Merrell. Until next time you can visit [Workology.com](https://workology.com) to listen to all our previous podcast episodes.

