

Episode 290: The Role of the CHRO and Gender Equality



Intro: [00:00:00.06] Welcome to the Workology Podcast, a podcast for the disruptive workplace leader. Join host Jessica Miller-Merrell, founder of Workology.com, as she sits down and gets to the bottom of trends, tools and case studies for the business leader, H.R. and recruiting professional who is tired of the status quo. Now, here's Jessica with this episode of Workology.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:00:25.27] Welcome to the Workology Podcast sponsored by Upskill HR and Ace The HR Exam. Today's podcast is part of the series on the Workology Podcast focused on the roles and responsibilities of the Chief Human Resources Officer or CHRO. The CHRO, sometimes called the Director of People or the Chief People Officer, is an executive level role that deals with managing human resources, as well as with organizational development and implementing policies of change to improve company culture, employee recognition, retention and engagement. This series, the CHRO series, is powered by Daily Pay. Today I'm joined by Nickle LaMoreaux. She's the SVP and CHRO for IBM. Nickle leads IBM's People Strategy Skills, Employee Experience and Services and the global HR team supporting more than 350,000 IBM across 170 countries in her 20 years at IBM. She has led across organizations from services to software to sales in major and emerging markets. Nickle's responsibilities drive the company's business growth through leadership development, town acquisition, performance management and skill building. Nickle, welcome to the Workology Podcast.

Nickle LaMoreaux: [00:01:40.19] It's great to be here today with you, Jessica.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:01:43.40] I'm so excited to chat with you. I want to talk about your background. You've been in H.R. with IBM really since the beginning of your career. Can you talk about why you chose H.R. as a career and the progression of your roles at IBM?

Nickle LaMoreaux: [00:01:57.83] Sure. When you say 20 years, I have to stop for a moment. Think, are you really talking about me? Might date be a little bit here. But what I will say is over my 20 years at IBM, I have gotten the opportunity to work across various H.R. disciplines from talent acquisition to compensation to learning and development. I've also gotten to be an HR Generalist in various places around the world, including Asia. I've supported the hardware, software and services businesses. So even though I've been in one company for 20 years, I feel like I've had multiple opportunities, experiences and even just different jobs. If you say to me, though, why did I get my start in H.R.? Like many H.R. professionals that I talk to, I kind of stumbled into it. But once I was here because it touches every part of an organization, because people are at the center, it does just totally get you captivated about the impact you can make. I started as a summer intern

because candidly, I wanted to go to law school and needed to make a little money before I could do that. And once I got a view of being an intern in talent acquisition, there was no turning back after that.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:03:23.90] What a great story. And you're you're right. IBM is is a very large company. So your, your roles in H.R. all over in different places of the organization and locations are, I think, not unlike somebody moving from company to company and into new roles. I wanted to ask you how the CHRO role has changed how a company leadership works with H.R. or vice versa?

Nickle LaMoreaux: [00:03:52.13] So here's what I would say about this. And this has probably been true for the last several decades. Practicing human resources is really about ensuring that you've got deep business acumen and that you are employing talent practices to help the business achieve its objectives. So a CHRO's work with leadership, many of them sometimes make the mistake of leading with H.R., leading with talent. And I think what is important for CHROs to do to really influence, get a seat at the table, is to ensure that they're starting with the business, that they have deep understanding of the business, and that they're then bringing talent practices, philosophies, policies to bear to achieve that. And I think a CHRO, if they lead by example and really getting deep in the business, the rest of the HR organization follows.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:04:58.61] This is true whether you are a five person company and you're H.R. or you are a 350,000 person company, like understanding the business is the key to building rapport and relationships and then figuring out what the organization needs and how you can support it with your H.R. department.

Nickle LaMoreaux: [00:05:16.91] Absolutely.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:05:18.62] We've been in this global pandemic for more than a year now, and I wanted to ask you about how you and your team have shifted to remote working and then what has been the biggest challenge for you and your team?

Nickle LaMoreaux: [00:05:30.68] Sure. So last March, it feels like a lifetime ago. 95 percent of our 350,000 person workforce around the globe shifted to working from home, working virtually almost overnight. We did it in a matter of just a couple of days. What we were doing during this time initially, as I will say, we were a little bit in crisis mode, figuring out how to get everybody connected and using the virtual tools that were available so that we could continue delivering for our clients and for the business. Once we got out of that, though, I think we all quickly learned and this has been the biggest challenge in the pandemic, is how were we going to go from crisis to really thriving? How were we going to kind of keep productivity up? But the biggest question I think CHROs were being asked by business leaders during this time is how do we not lose the company culture? As weeks turned to months and we realized that just the normal crisis, productivity interventions weren't going to be enough. All of us as CHROs and HR professionals around the world have been on this point of culture. How do you keep culture going in a very dispersed virtual environment? What

we found it IBM was that we actually saw our culture advance. We saw a flattening of the hierarchy not being in the office, but through these virtual tools and connections, it's hastened the pace of our decision making. It's allowed us to move quickly because there was no playbook for the pandemic and the decisions that we needed to make. The second thing we saw is that we've actually seen inclusion increase during this virtual time, with 88 percent of IBMers saying that they can be their authentic selves at work.

Nickle LaMoreaux: [00:07:37.38] And finally, and maybe this is my biggest point of pride. This really accelerated, authentic, empathetic leadership. Something that HR professionals have been talking about for a long time, about how do you bring that to the workplace. And the pandemic made it so that it was no choice. Every day we were being invited, we were guest in our colleagues homes as we over video chat, got to know family, friends, pets. And so what happened during this time through just day to day practice, we saw empathy and authenticity enter into the workplace where before it was challenging, when home and work were so separate. So if you say, well, how did we then do this? How did we become a more empathetic, inclusive and faster culture? Some of it was through just leaning into the environment that we were in, but it was also through a significant amount of training that we gave our managers, colleagues, team members on empathy about how to work in a virtual environment. And then the second thing we did is we asked our employees through many post surveys that were continuously going on, ask me anything, Slack channels, virtual town halls that were happening with leadership around the world. We really doubled down on this kind of co creating with our employees and candidly, just listening. And as we go into the post pandemic workplace, whether you're going completely remote back to the office or in a hybrid, I'm hoping that the lessons we've learned here continue on.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:09:29.97] Hearing you explain this and I think about the fact that we had to move so quickly in such a short amount of time, make decisions, set up an infrastructure and flex so that our people could be able to work from home. I don't think very many HR people have really stopped for a minute and thought about the fact that we did this and truly the, the fact that it actually is. So it is, if we can do that, we can do anything. I truly believe that.

Nickle LaMoreaux: [00:10:02.28] Jessica, I think you are so right. So I think from me to you, not just to the IBM professionals, but but everybody kind of listening to this podcast, I think I applaud you. Businesses, organizations could not have survived without our profession really rising to the challenge.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:10:24.30] Exactly what I was going to say. I was thinking rising to the challenge as you were talking. And and we have so moving forward, I want us to keep thinking about that or be reminded of really that grit and flexibility and just ability to to accomplish anything, hopefully not out of like necessity like we had. But we can dream up whatever we want and how to support the organization. And I believe that we can do it.

Nickle LaMoreaux: [00:10:53.72] Yes.

Break: [00:10:54.84] Let's take a reset. This is Jessica Miller-Merrell, and you are listening to the Workology Podcast sponsored by Upskil HR and ACE the HR Exam. We're talking about the role of the CHRO and impact for women in the workplace. This is part of our CHRO series powered by Daily Pay. This conversation, this particular episode is with Nickle LaMoreaux. She's the SVP and CHRO for IBM.

Break: [00:11:21.94] Personal and professional development is essential for successful H.R. leaders. Join Upskil H.R. to access life training, community, and over one hundred on demand courses for that dynamic leader. H.R. recert credits available. Visit UpskillHR.com for more.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:11:37.89] I wanted to switch gears just a little bit and talk about the pink collar recession. And this is caused, been caused by the pandemic and it's been a hot topic for HR professionals. I wanted to ask you about how IBM is creating pathways for women to re-enter the workforce in light of the pink collar recession.

Nickle LaMoreaux: [00:11:59.28] Jessica, I'm glad you asked about this, because my previous answer about how you can elevate during the pandemic, there have also been significant challenges, health, wellness, mental health. But this pink color recession is also collateral, and that tragedy of the pandemic that I think it's incumbent on all H.R. professionals to ensure that they have a strategy to address. The pandemic has had a devastating impact on women around the globe and every labor force. You know, the IBM Institute for Business Value reported that in 2020 alone, five million women were pushed from their jobs and that the female participation rate is the lowest it's been since 1988. If this isn't a wake up call for every business, particularly for HR professionals, I don't know what is. And I think it's important for companies to think about solving this in three different ways. Benefits, programs and then the culture. Benefits, I think, is what organizations immediately gravitate to. What can you do to kind of keep women in the workforce, give them flexibility that is needed, particularly during a global pandemic, when they are taking an undue share of the burden of household responsibilities? It's important to put in place things like leave, flex time, jobs share, emergency backup care, paid care leave. During the pandemic here, we saw that we were able to put in these programs, some that have existed for a long time, but things like emergency backup care, elder care, those were programs that we really doubled down on during the pandemic to ensure that all IBMers but women in particular were getting the support that they need.

Nickle LaMoreaux: [00:14:08.60] But benefits alone is not enough. You also need to make sure that you're focused on programs, programs that can support, keep and bring more women into your workforce. At IBM, we right now, 50 percent of our US job openings don't require a college degree. This is allowing us to open the aperture of candidates that can come into the workforce from all walks of life. And so that's really important for us, particularly for women who might be thinking about changing careers or want to move into roles that have higher wage opportunities in the tech sector. We've started apprenticeship programs so that there can be paid on the job training. And then one of my favorite programs is the return ship program. This is an opportunity for women who may have taken a break from the workforce for a variety of reasons to come back into tech jobs and refresh their skills. And so far in this tech grant program, 99 percent of the participants have been women. So benefits, programs, and then, of course, all of this gets underscored with

what some of you and I spoke about earlier, Jessica, a culture that embraces flexibility, outcomes over activities and really embraces empathetic leadership so that we can structure jobs and work in a way that fits everyone's lifestyle.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:15:49.55] I want to talk more about the tech reentry program and ask you specifically about any impact, you said 99 percent of those entering this program are women, but what other impact or results are you expecting? And how this program not only benefits IBM, but also your diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives?

Nickle LaMoreaux: [00:16:12.17] Absolutely. And this is a point that we're extremely focused on. At IBM, we saw almost a point and a half growth and 2020 in women representation in our technical jobs and tech re-entry was a big piece of that. We've also seen just recently that we are finding that we're having a significant increase in the tech reentry program, two times as many applicants into it. And for 2021, we're going to have two times the number of returners, as we call them, than we did last year. So this is a huge pipeline for us to increase not just our overall representation, but particularly in tech roles where we often see women underrepresented.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:17:03.26] I can't wait to reconnect with you in 18 months or five years to say, OK, Nickle, what what what's the story here? How how to what's the bigger impact than, and, I mean, stock price growth of the company? More retention like it's, I, I can't wait to see what the, what the ROI is so that other H.R. leaders and businesses can say, oh, wow, this has really made an impact. I need to grow my, you know, reentry program or maybe take a look at this a different way.

Nickle LaMoreaux: [00:17:39.38] Absolutely, Jessica. And I will welcome that conversation. That's how confident we are that these programs aren't just DE&I for the sake of DN&I. This is the right thing to do as responsible employers, but it also has better business results as an outcome.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:17:59.12] One of the things I love about the work that you're doing is your focus on gender equality. And it's a top five formal business priority, ensuring that women aren't being left behind in IBM's current and future workforce. Can you talk a little bit about how HR professionals who may not work for a company with the resources like IBM has introduced, maybe they can introduce this in something into their workplace and culture?

Nickle LaMoreaux: [00:18:24.77] Absolutely. And look, this is, I think, a really important point for all HR professionals listening. You can get started. Absolutely. You can get started to make sure that you're making an impact. And so there are a couple of different entry points depending on the culture and the leadership and the resources available to you. One simply could be at the programmatic level. Take a look at the benefits you have. Really evaluate. Is there even one program that you could put in place? You know, tech reentry doesn't have to be about hundreds or thousands of women. It can be about a handful. So think about

reentry programs, maybe at a specific location. Even if you start small, what you find is that momentum will grow. The second good entry point for, for any company is about driving accountability. Are you measuring diversity and inclusion in a real way? Are you giving business leaders visibility too? Are they improving or not? Where do they need to improve? And this accountability with measurable goals across the organization is another way to kind of meet people where they are. And then the last big plug, because I think this spreads across every industry, is to really evaluate what qualifications are truly needed for your job openings. I think many organizations use degrees, college degrees as a screening point that you must have one in order to be qualified for a job. But I'd really challenge, is it a degree that's necessary or is it specific skills? And when you take the skills first approach versus a degrees first approach, what you find is that you open the aperture to individuals that may not have degrees but do have the skills you have to do the job. And so it's a philosophical change that may be something that HR professionals listening can implement in their organizations.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:20:52.24] What you're sharing are, I think, reasonable changes that they can make in relatively short order. It just involves a little planning, some executive conversations and then thinking about the potential business impact that a change like maybe removing degree requirements on job openings could have and then talking to the leadership team about what that business impact might be, putting it into dollars and cents like really speak in their language.

Nickle LaMoreaux: [00:21:24.61] Absolutely.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:21:26.20] Another question I wanted to end with is as HR leaders, what should we be thinking about when building women and family friendly policies into our workplace? I think a lot of us are focused on the reentry right now and what that's going to look like. But the world has fundamentally changed and people's schedules and lives. So how do we create family friendly workplaces that support our employees, all parents, women, men and everybody in between?

Nickle LaMoreaux: [00:22:03.11] Yeah, you know, this is a topic that I'm glad you asked, Jessica, because I don't think it's getting enough air time when we're talking about family friendly policies or even return to the workplace. I think a lot of time is being given to where work gets done and flexibility about where. And I do think that is an important discussion to have. But I don't think enough time is being spent on when work gets done and the flexibility that organizations likely can offer about working hours. You know, if we think about this concept of nine to five, it was a concept that, you know, was, was built in the industrial revolution and yet we're still living with it in organizations. And so when we think about family friendly policies, I do think teams in organizations thinking about what hours are really needed for teams to come together and do colocated or work, and what are the times when individuals can go away and do work on their own time? I think this is a really important discussion. It certainly helps women. It certainly helps those of us that are working through family schedules. But it helps all people to kind of make sure that there's room for things that are important for them outside of work. And so I do think this flexibility about when work gets done and being purposeful about that is really important. It has a second effect as well. As organizations, I do think that flexibility is inherently something that you focus on when you focus on outcomes over activities. Organizations that are micromanaging activities will often say we can't do flexibility with where or when. But if you're an organization that is focused on outcomes and allowing teams and individuals to find the best

way to get from point A to point B to deliver those outcomes, you're going to have organizations that inherently are more diverse because they allow that flexibility.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:24:30.05] You're speaking my language and it's so great and so refreshing to hear you share, because my hope is this, and I think both our hopes is that today, this conversation, people will be able to take what we've talked about and use that as a catalyst to be able to talk to their executive team and make some meaningful changes to make the workplace more family friendly. It's not about being the policy police. It's about helping to, to make sure that the, the people in our business are aligned with the business and that we help support them in different ways. So I really appreciate you taking the time to chat with us today, Nickle. It's been great.

Nickle LaMoreaux: [00:25:09.38] It's my pleasure, Jessica. And as you know, it's never been a better time to be in HR.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:25:15.14] I agree. I will make sure that we include links to the pink collar recession report. IBM has some resources for us as well, as well as your LinkedIn profile and the career site for IBM. For those of you who want to take a look at some job postings and how they're repositioning and changing, how they hire focused on things like gender equality. Thank you so much.

Nickle LaMoreaux: [00:25:40.61] It's been wonderful being here, Jessica.

Closing: [00:25:42.95] 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/](https://www.workologypodcast.com/) advertising.

Closing: [00:25:56.72] It's really interesting to delve into how a role like to CHRO, whose experience more closely connects them to the strategy and operations of the overall business with the rest of the company. I love talking about people management diversity in global high growth environments. Nickle's insights here are invaluable. I love the work that they're doing in tech reentry and their focus on gender equality in the workplace. Thank you to Nickle for taking the time to share her knowledge and insights with us today. Thank you for joining the Workology Podcast sponsored by Upskil HR and ACE The HR Exam. This CHRO series is powered by Daily Pay and the Workology Podcast itself is a podcast for the disruptive workplace leader who's tired of the status quo. My name is Jessica Miller-Merrell. Until next time you can visit [Workology.com](https://www.workologypodcast.com/) to listen to all our Workology Podcast episodes.