



Transcript

Title: Grey Area: HR Strategy for Blue- and White-Collar Workforces

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Host: Dr. Shari Simpson, Thought Leader, Paylocity

Guest: Jason Lerner, Human Resources Director, Groundwater Treatment and Technology

[00:00:00] **Announcer:** You're listening to The HR Mixtape, a podcast for leaders who want to understand people, strengthen culture, and navigate change with clarity. Today's conversation starts now.

[00:00:15] **Dr. Shari Simpson:** Joining me today is Jason Lerner, Human Resources Director at Groundwater Treatment and Technology. Jason brings experience leading HR strategy in technical environments where skills, safety, and retention are critical.

[00:00:34] **Dr. Shari Simpson:** Jason, thank you so much for jumping on the podcast with me today.

[00:00:37] **Jason Lerner:** Good morning, Shari. It's a pleasure to be here with you, so thank you.

[00:00:41] **Dr. Shari Simpson:** So I'd love to start with this question to just kind of tee up our audience. Maybe share a little bit about yourself and your background and how you got into the space that you're in right now.

[00:00:51] **Jason Lerner:** Sure. So I have a little bit of a non-traditional background. I started out in sales in the beginning of my career and then pivoted into childcare for 20 years. I worked in the childcare space, actually owned five childcare centers of my own, family-owned. I ran that for a little over 20 years, then got fully into the HR space.

[00:01:12] **Jason Lerner:** I did all the human resources there with the childcare centers, but I fully got into it, doing a little bit of property management, physical therapy type of work, helping develop HR departments from nothing and building the processes and all that kind of stuff, and then got into trucking, engineering, and then now in wastewater remediation.

[00:01:33] **Jason Lerner:** A little bit of a different path to get here, but I enjoy building departments, taking it from the ground floor or taking it from a position where it's not effective and then being able to take it down and build it back up to where it is effective.

[00:01:50] **Dr. Shari Simpson:** You know, most HR people that I talk to don't have a traditional background where they went and did their undergrad in HR and then their master's and then got into this work. So I think your untraditional background is probably very traditional for the HR space. And having worked in childcare, that in itself has so many transferable skills with running the business and dealing with parents. I think that probably set you up for a very successful career in HR. So thanks for sharing that.

[00:02:16] **Jason Lerner:** I agree with you. In the beginning, it was hard because people saw my background and they looked at me and were like, "You worked for yourself for 20 years. How are you gonna go work for somebody else?" And I was like, "A lot harder. I had 450 bosses." All the families we provided services for, each of them was your boss, right?

[00:02:33] **Jason Lerner:** So it's a little easier when you're working for one. But one of the biggest takeaways I had from owning my own business and then going to work was the ability to mix HR with operations. I have a good understanding of how the company makes money, what their goals are. So I've learned to align my HR teams with the goals of the company so that you're fitting in with operations and helping them become more efficient and helping with retention in that space as well.

[00:03:10] **Dr. Shari Simpson:** So good. Well, I want to dive into our conversation, and I love this topic. I think it's very relevant, and it centers around this idea of gray industries. So for those who don't know what gray industries are or what that term means, let's start there, and maybe you can help define that for our audience.

[00:03:29] **Jason Lerner:** Sure. So what I consider a gray industry is when you have your blue-collar workers who work with their hands in their shop or in the field, and then you have your white-collar

workers who are inside. You put them together, and you get kind of a gray industry. So you're doing a combination of blue-collar work and white-collar work together in the same environment.

[00:03:41] **Jason Lerner:** And I see it now being very relevant where right now there's a high unemployment rate for college graduates and they're struggling to get into the workforce. They don't know that there are really good opportunities in non-traditional industries. A lot of people wouldn't go to college thinking, "I'm gonna get my bachelor's degree in finance and then go work for a wastewater management company." So I think there's education that can be done to reach out to students and recent graduates and teach them that there are really good opportunities in small to mid-sized companies where you can make a difference pretty quickly and your career path can be accelerated.

[00:04:39] **Dr. Shari Simpson:** I think one of the things I see in that transition from formal education or from having a different type of job and then moving into a gray industry or blue-collar role is often there's that question of, "My skills don't transfer." So as you've been working with people who have made those transitions, what are some of the things that you ask them to help them understand that they have a lot of possibilities?

[00:05:09] **Jason Lerner:** What they don't see is the opportunity to work with your hands a little bit. People who have engineering degrees or some non-traditional background don't always understand where they fit. So they can work their way up. We have a person who works for us who was in the shop as an engineering student, and she was really good. They found that she was able to take the skills she learned in the shop while she was working, and now she's working in our engineering department setting up remediation and filtration systems.

[00:05:44] **Jason Lerner:** We have three or four recent college graduates working in our shop, but they're also going out in the field. They can take their college experience, go in the field, learn our business by actually seeing how it operates, and then move into the office. Now when they go see a client, it's very easy for them to speak to the business because they've already been out there doing it. It's an education. And a good way to do that is to go to college fairs where we can talk to people before they graduate or right after and explain what we do, how we do it, and what the career path is for them.

[00:06:51] **Dr. Shari Simpson:** The hands-on experience is so important. I worked for a company many years ago called Peapod, a division of Ahold Grocers. They're a grocery delivery company, think a competitor to Instacart but all the same company. Anybody who was salaried, no matter what position, had to start their first day on the truck delivering groceries for the whole day.

[00:07:18] **Dr. Shari Simpson:** I thought it was such a weird approach at the time, but as I got into my role in training and development, it gave me a completely different perspective on creating training opportunities for employees because I really knew the complexities of their roles and what skills we could leverage.

[00:07:56] **Dr. Shari Simpson:** So in thinking about that, sometimes our hiring practices include questions or processes that weed out people with non-traditional backgrounds, who have hands-on experience that we don't translate inside our hiring processes as something that can flex between a blue-collar job and potentially a white-collar job. So as you've worked to screen your own candidates, how have you reformatted that interview process to really help candidates who come from non-traditional backgrounds?

[00:08:35] **Jason Lerner:** I love that question. It's not for everybody. There are a lot of people who don't want to do this or won't fit into it the right way. One of the things I look at is what people like to do when they're not working. A question I'll always ask is, "What do you love? What's your enjoyment?"

[00:09:02] **Jason Lerner:** And when you hear people who enjoy fixing cars, doing do-it-yourself projects in their house, or just fixing things and always want to understand how something works, those people can often fit into these organizations because they want to use their hands. They want to learn something different. They don't want to sit at a desk all day. They want to do different things. That's a huge trait that helps.

[00:09:41] **Jason Lerner:** And as part of our interview process, when people come to visit our office, we put them into personal protective equipment. We give them a hard hat, put on a vest, and take them on a tour of our yard and our shop. We give them the opportunity to see the environment they'd be working in.



[00:09:59] **Jason Lerner:** Our building is a 200-year-old building, and our office is inside of a working quarry. So it's a non-traditional workplace. When people come in, you want to see their face and how they react to being in that environment. Some people really enjoy it and don't know they had the opportunity to do that, and that's where I think the disconnect is.

[00:10:27] **Jason Lerner:** We don't know how to necessarily find these candidates, but these candidates also don't know how to find us. So that's why we're looking at college fairs. But there are also people who are in transition, who got laid off or lost their job, who are looking for something. They wouldn't think to look in this industry, or they're targeting bigger companies and they don't see the value in a small to mid-sized company and the ability to make a change and move up.

[00:11:04] **Dr. Shari Simpson:** That variance in what people are looking for leads me to ask you about Gen Z, because I keep reading that that generation is more apt to look at the trades compared to knowledge worker opportunities. Have you seen that to be true?

[00:11:23] **Jason Lerner:** Yes. And what I've done here is I've been working on a succession plan, and part of that is we have some people here who've been here a long time. The average tenure at this company is almost 10 years. So there's a lot of institutional knowledge, and nobody's thought about how you continue that institutional knowledge. This is where we're looking at Gen Z and trying to bring them in to understand it.

[00:11:45] **Jason Lerner:** One thing Gen Z gets a bit of a rap for. I have two kids who are Gen Z, so I totally get it. But you need to understand they always want to learn something, and they want to see very quickly where the growth is for them. They don't have the patience to wait it out and see. They want to know how they're going to grow, where, and how quickly. And in a small to mid-sized company like this, this is a perfect opportunity. You come in, work in the field, learn what we do, and you can very quickly move into an internal position because you already have the math skills or engineering skills you need.

[00:12:31] **Dr. Shari Simpson:** You know, that's so interesting because it does sound like you have a very well-defined path for them. We hear that in other places too, that Gen Z definitely wants that clear path to promotion. And it's not that they feel they deserve it automatically. It's more, I just want clarity in how I get there. So how have you coached your managers to make that transition between supporting blue-collar employees and supporting white-collar employees without creating an us-them mentality?

[00:13:17] **Jason Lerner:** I love it because I was on a call this morning doing exactly that. We're trying to get the sales department to talk more to operations. They're out there selling the products and services, and operations has to catch up to them. What we're trying to do is align sales with operations so we can support them when they sell.

[00:13:32] **Jason Lerner:** To your point, the best thing a company can do is set expectations. When candidates are interviewing with you, don't just feed them a line about what they can do. Set the expectation, be transparent, and say here's what you need to do, here's what you can accomplish if you do these things and move up.

[00:14:05] **Jason Lerner:** And something that's missing a lot in the workforce is accountability. People don't want to hold other people accountable. But when you hold people accountable, your best workers stay. Because if somebody's not holding their weight and your best performer has to do more work, you don't lose the person who's not doing as much work. You lose the person who is your performer because they're actually doing more. So it's in your interest to set the boundaries and let people know where their career growth is. It's a miss if you don't do that up front.

[00:14:41] **Dr. Shari Simpson:** The research shows us that clarity is kindness. There is a bit with some of the younger generations, some avoidance of conflict because they don't want to create tension. And I think in a way it's been good. As a Gen X, we don't have a problem with conflict, but sometimes we over-flex to that area. That being said, you can still hold people accountable with kindness. We need to have that conversation more because it's about civility, and it's about showing up. Most people want clear expectations on what good looks like in an organization so they can work toward that. Whether it's blue collar or white collar, that clarity is very important.

[00:15:39] **Jason Lerner:** I'd agree with you. The other part of that is sometimes people forget that you need to talk to people the way they want to be talked to. Instead of having one way to talk to everybody, you need to understand how they want to be spoken to. When you can master that skill, it helps you

relate to people, and you get a feeling for where they're going and what they want. That helps not only in recruiting people but also in retaining them.

[00:16:08] **Jason Lerner:** And that all goes back to active listening. Don't just look to respond. Hear what they're saying, listen to what they're saying, and have appreciation even if you disagree. Either find common ground, but at least you know where they're coming from.

[00:16:41] **Dr. Shari Simpson:** I don't think that necessarily means using all of Gen Z's slang when you're talking to them, right? In case anybody thought that's what you meant.

[00:16:52] **Jason Lerner:** No, not at all. That'll seem fake, quite honestly. I mean, I've done things where I've gone out in the warehouse and people look at me as HR. When I was in trucking, we had a fleet safety program, and I took a forklift certification class. One day someone was giving me a hard time, and I said, "Come off the forklift." I literally got on the forklift, unloaded ten pallets off the truck, and stacked them up against the wall. After that, I never had another problem. They're like, "HR has a forklift certification?" I'm like, "Yeah, this HR can get on a forklift and unload pallets for you."

[00:17:36] **Jason Lerner:** So that goes back to understanding the environment you're in and being able to speak that language. It automatically gets you credibility too.

[00:17:46] **Dr. Shari Simpson:** And it's such a good illustration of the concept we talk about all the time, that HR can only be as successful in an organization if they know the business. That business might be a knowledge business, or it might be a very hands-on situation where you go get the forklift certification. There's credibility there that's different than if you just sit behind the desk and never immerse yourself in the business. Which makes me curious: are there other myths you've heard around blue-collar or gray-collar work that you'd like the audience to retire going forward?

[00:18:27] **Jason Lerner:** I think people look at blue-collar industries and feel like it's people who didn't go to college who go into those environments. And I'm seeing here that it's not necessarily the case. You need a mix. You have some people who didn't go to school and some people who have a college education. There's a sweet spot of having both types of workers, and I think the people without a college education learn from those who have one, and vice versa.

[00:18:59] **Jason Lerner:** People need to open their eyes a little and understand that just because you went to college doesn't mean you can't work there. When I talk to friends who are looking for jobs and they give me their target list of giant companies, I say, "What about a blue-collar industry? What about a smaller company?" There are a lot more opportunities there. You might get hired for one job, but you're really going to have two or three, because it's a more nimble type of environment. You can change things pretty quickly. That's one of the big myths I see: that blue collar and white collar don't really exist together. And I'd like to see people recognize that there is that merging, and it turns into a gray industry.

[00:19:58] **Dr. Shari Simpson:** Jason, what a great final thought for us to leave on. It's so much for us to take away and think about when it comes to embracing the ideas around blue and gray industries, and the work that you and HR practitioners in that space are doing. So thanks for sitting down and chatting with me about this.

[00:20:15] **Jason Lerner:** Thank you, Shari, for the time. I appreciate it. This was a great experience, so thank you.

[00:20:28] **Announcer:** Thanks for tuning in to The HR Mixtape. Like, share, review, and subscribe to support the show and help more people discover these conversations. Until next time, keep the conversation going.