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# Flex or Break: Building the Agile Workforce Your Business Actually Needs

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**Guest:** James Terry, Head Of US Revenue, IndeedFlex

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**Announcer** [00:02]

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.

**Dr. Shari Simpson** [00:15]

Joining me today is James Terry, Head of US Revenue at IndeedFlex. James helps companies build more agile workforces through flexible staffing solutions, especially in fast-moving industries.

**Dr. Shari Simpson** [00:33]

James, thank you so much for jumping on the podcast with me.

**James Terry** [00:36]

Thanks so much for having me, Shari. I'm excited.

**Dr. Shari Simpson** [00:38]

So am I. And this topic, I think, is so important right now as we think about everything that I'm seeing out there from AI and recruiting and talent acquisition, all the kind of conversations we're having about staffing. This conversation really is about how do we think about it maybe a little bit differently. So I'm curious what your thoughts are on how we think about staffing not being an HR problem, but really becoming a business survival issue right now.

**James Terry** [01:07]

You know, it's funny you ask that question because fundamentally, HR is at its core a business problem. And I think that's actually one of the things that is really exciting about the changes I'm seeing right now. People are starting to wake up to how strategic of a partner HR can be. If you think about any type of staffing, if you don't have the people, whether that's the doctors, the lawyers, the people working in the warehouse, in the call center, the people serving the tables, fundamentally the business doesn't function. Usually, in most industries, the highest output cost you have is your labor. It's one of your most valuable, important assets. And when you think about the best companies in the world, the reason they've done the most is because they've done a really good job at hiring the right people, retaining the right people, and driving effective productivity. One of the things we're really noticing right now is that HR leaders, with AI, because HR has historically been very much a ledger and a pen and paper and a lot of clicking boxes, and HR is now being able to automate a lot of these tasks, we're noticing that HR business professionals, especially the ones that are really forward thinking, are starting to think about how can we actually be a more strategic business partner? How can we be a profit center as opposed to a cost center? How can we help drive business impact? Because ultimately, if I can have a lower turnover rate or faster time to fill, then if I've got a warehouse or a factory, that means higher throughput. That means more profitability. And a lot of HR leaders are starting to wake up to the fact that they can actually be a really key and fundamental part of the way these businesses are being run.

**Dr. Shari Simpson** [03:02]

It's so true. I just had a conversation with another guest about that exact concept around HR really knowing the business and being a true business leader with HR skills, not an HR leader with business skills. And when it comes to staffing, it really lends itself to us being able to hire for the business, not hire for a role or for that FTE or that headcount. But I'm curious, what have you seen as companies are trying to implement things that increase their productivity, become more strategic, but not add a bunch of extra time into their hiring process? Because right now, what we're seeing is that talent acquisition professionals are getting inundated with applications in a completely different way than they have before. And while they're trying to use some of these tools to be more productive, some of these tools that candidates are using to be more productive have put a big strain on the system in totality.

**James Terry** [04:05]

It's a really interesting and fundamental change that's happening right now. Not only do you have the preponderance of AI happening, so candidates can now apply for, you see it online, like 400 jobs a day, with really customized cover letters and resumes that are tailored to the position they're applying for through AI. But in addition to that, we're in an interesting point right now where, really for the first time since COVID, you have more job seekers than you have jobs. Up until just about a few months ago, you had more jobs available than you really had job seekers. So not only do you have more people generally applying because they're out of work and looking for jobs, but you also have the ability for more people to apply

for more roles. One of the really important things we find is that it's not about just the volume of applicants, it's about the quality of applicants. What can you do to utilize tools and technology to drive quality through? It's not about technology making a decision for you. It's about technology helping to filter out candidates so that you can be left with the top candidates. What IndeedFlex is doing is picture a world for a recruiter where they can post a job, use AI to help them be really specific about what types of qualities they're looking for in a candidate, post it out there, and the system can then scrape and find all the applicants that are aligned from a skill set standpoint to that job, put them through an initial AI interview screening, essentially a chat screening with an AI agent that can ask second and third-level questions. It ranks the candidates for you on a scale of 1 to 100. You can go back and look at specific questions that were answered. Or you can say, I just want to press the easy button, and it'll take the top 10 candidates and automatically schedule them for interviews. Think about all the time you have back. Previously you were reviewing resumes and by the way, you had implicit bias. Now you've got a system that's being much more consistent about the way that it's screening candidates and driving better quality.

**Dr. Shari Simpson** [07:07]

I can't tell you how many hours I've spent over the 20-plus years of my HR career doing that exact thing, just reading resumes. Everything from doing it digitally to back in the day when you would print them out and have them out in front of you. So these tools have definitely helped us. Have you gotten any feedback from candidates about this process? Pros or cons? What made me think about this is my husband recently went through an application process for an adjunct professorship and part of that process was a digital virtual interview where he recorded himself answering questions, like a Zoom to himself. From his perspective, he said at this level, that seems really weird. Somebody doesn't want to call me. But from the TA perspective, if you can use a tool like that and help vet candidates, there's this balance. I'm curious what you're seeing from the candidate pool.

**James Terry** [08:11]

You hit the nail on the head. It is a balance. One of the big differentiators within a business is what's my employer value proposition? How do people feel loved and cared for and that they're not just a number? If your first interaction feels very impersonal, there can be apprehension. I do think that from the standpoint of hiring almost any role, especially more skilled roles, you need to have a human interview in that process. But it's fair to say the world has changed. We are getting a lot more applicants and we want to make sure we are making a more thoughtful decision. At the very least, the candidate has the opportunity to state their case. One of the really interesting things we've done is we interview a lot of our candidates post-hire about this. And what we find is that candidates really like this type of interview setup for the first screening, because they can do it at their own time. If I work a 9-to-5 job and a recruiter works a 9-to-5 job, I have to take time out of my day to go and have this phone screen, whereas now you can do it in the evening. It gives you more flexibility as a job seeker. In addition to that, we find that candidates tend to be a little more honest and open when they're just talking to a system as opposed to a person. We've done this research and we find that candidates overwhelmingly, over 60-70% of candidates, are either as happy with or have a higher preference to do an AI or virtual screening as opposed to an in-person screening. And hey, everyone has implicit biases. What these types of systems do is cut all of that out. At the same time, all of our interviews at IndeedFlex are still human-reviewed. We're still reviewing every single one because while AI is evolving at such a fast pace, it's not there yet. We need to make sure we have this really nice balance between the technological and the human side. What we've found is that even though we have human recruiters reviewing all these interviews, we've taken our recruiter productivity from like 13 or 14 interviews a day to now they're able to review 80, because they can go specifically to the most important questions and review those, as opposed to going through an entire interview process.

**Dr. Shari Simpson** [12:37]

Well, and I suspect too, for those that are looking for maybe a second job or a gig job, those types of interviews are really good, because they can do it after hours or on the weekends. I also like the idea of removing some of the game that we play when we interview. I've coached people on this before, especially as we went to more virtual interviews. A candidate might notice your background, like, let's say you have a picture of you catching a fish, and the candidate makes a comment about the fact that they love fishing. And now the hiring manager is like, oh my gosh, I love fishing too. So now you've created this camaraderie in the interview that has nothing to do with the job description or the skills. I love that ability to pull some of that out of the conversation and really focus on the skills. And I think that leads into my next question, because it really focuses more on what an agile workforce looks like and how you can tap into different skills. How have you seen organizations really take that mentality of a more flexible, agile workforce?

**James Terry** [13:46]

Because of technological advancements in the last five or ten years, that's actually forced a change in the demands of what job seekers have. Think about it. I'm now able to go on my phone and order just about anything in the world to be delivered to my house in two hours. You couldn't do that ten years ago. And me as a consumer, I'm also a job seeker at certain points in my career. So the demands I have around flexibility and decision-making power and control, I also am starting to demand as a job seeker. Also, Gen Z is starting to come into the workforce and they have certain demands as well around flexibility in the types of work they're picking up. Organizations need to understand that people making under \$30 an hour have second jobs, whether you know it or not. Whether that is driving for rideshare, doing food delivery, or pouring beer at the local stadium on the weekends, they're all doing that. The question is, how can you provide that type of flexibility? Because what it does, and this is where HR comes into such a key point in the conversation, is operations teams say, well, we have these shift patterns, this is how it is. And that's all very valid. But what happens is they've set it up to fit for the business and

not to fit for the employee. And what HR has an opportunity to do is show that by having more flexibility in the way that people are interacting with their job, you can actually open up a whole market of untapped labor resources. Think about caretakers who only have four or five or six hours in the afternoon, but they can't work on Wednesday because they have to take grandma to the doctor. They weren't able to work at your facility before. Now, if you have some type of flexibility, they are. Think about students, think about retirees. If you've got a really rigid shift pattern of nine to five Monday through Friday and every other Saturday, they're not able to work that. But if you're willing to be more flexible, you can attract those candidates. And then this is where really strong HR professionals become diamonds. They say, hey, I know this is a little bit of an adjustment, but if we run a pilot on this and we look at this different segmentation of job seekers in these flexible shift patterns, the time to hire is better, the turnover rate is lower, the productivity is better, the commitment is better. We don't have as many HR cases or as many injuries. So driving the pilot and then being able to equate the business impact, because when we lower the turnover rate by 3% or 4%, do you know what that means to our overall cost as a business? That is the type of conversation that the best of the best HR leaders are having. And that's how they're really starting to drive change in the businesses and becoming more of a profit center.

**Dr. Shari Simpson** [17:53]

You gave such a good example that I think sometimes we miss, and it's that pilot program spot. You can definitely end up in a scenario where you're having an us-them conversation between operations and HR. We've all been there. And I've coached HR leaders to find your business champion on the operations side. But I love the pilot idea because you can do it low stakes, you can have a start and end date, and you can look at the specific metrics that are important to your organization. The thing is, though, your organization does have to be a little bit in a good spot for innovation and for some risk. Have you coached anybody on how do you have those conversations if you're in a spot where you don't have the organization's ability to give you some space for risk?

**James Terry** [18:44]

That's the tough one. Typically what we find is that you have to stick your neck out. When you're trying to change shift patterns across 32 different locations, you need people who are career-oriented and say, I have an opportunity to make a change in the business and potentially do something that is going to have a major impact on the overall organization. So you need people that are forward-thinking and willing to take risks, that also work within an organization where risk-taking is a little bit accepted. Within the organization that I run, I always tell people, try it and fail. Fail nine times. If you get one win, that was so worth it because you can then multiply off of that one. But a big part of what we find is really important is leading with data. If you can equip an HR professional with the ability to get the data, that becomes very hard to argue with. If you can show here's our current turnover rate and here's the turnover rate by certain cohorts of workers or shift patterns, hey, we just want to try it in this one area, it becomes hard to argue with. And the literacy to be able to understand the rest of the business is so important. Just like a recruiter or an HR professional has metrics they have to hit, what are the metrics that operations leader needs to hit? How many calls, how many resolutions, how many packages, how many deliveries, how many widgets? If you can understand that and then start to equate that back to the human capital you're using to deliver that result, it can be really, really impactful. And I can't tell you how often I talk to HR professionals and they can rattle off cost per hire, time to hire, interview to hire rate. But then once that person has gotten their first paycheck, it's like they're no longer interested. And you're like, wait, what's the ramp-up time? What's the productivity rate? What's the one-month, two-month, six-month, 12-month turnover rate? What are the turnover rates by different cohorts or groups? If you can start to look at that stuff, because that's fundamentally what the operations team cares about, and if you have intimate knowledge into how the business is operating, that will equip you to have those really detailed, value-added conversations.

**Dr. Shari Simpson** [21:33]

James, this was such a good conversation. I love that we ended on data and metrics because I could not agree more. That is such a really important skill set for HR professionals to have and to be able to talk and speak in that way. So really appreciate your perspective and your ideas around flexibility and using AI. I'll ask you one quick last question. For our audience, what's one takeaway you hope they walk away from this conversation with?

**James Terry** [22:05]

I'd say the biggest takeaway, maybe two if that's okay: one of them is fall forward. Try things, fail at them, learn from them, and then move forward. And the other one is something from a book I've been reading recently by Brene Brown, Dare to Lead. I love that book because essentially it's about radical honesty. She has a concept called the rumble, where you need to be willing to put yourself into vulnerable situations, have trust with your colleagues that you all want the same thing, and sometimes disagree and get into it and have those discussions. Sometimes a little bit of healthy friction can really be powerful, especially if you all have the shared agreement that at the end of the day, we all want the same thing, which is the success of the business and the success of the employees. If you can help build a culture where fundamentally we're going to disagree and we're going to have arguments but these arguments are always in service of how do we drive the mission of this organization, you're going to get the best outcomes. That's how we all grow and succeed. The most successful teams have strong diversity. They have people in HR, finance, operations, and all different fields. Because you take those different cross-functional knowledge areas, put them together, and that's where one plus one equals ten. So be honest, have the candor, always be trying to learn new things and fall forward, and be willing to have the hard conversations.

**Dr. Shari Simpson** [23:52]

James, such great takeaways for our audience. Thanks for sitting down and chatting with me for a few minutes.



**James Terry** [23:56]

Thanks so much for having me, Shari.