

- You're listening to HR Mix Tape, your podcast with the perfect mix of practical advice, thought-provoking interviews and stories that just hit different so that work doesn't have to feel, well, like work. Now, your host, Shari Simpson.

- Joining me today is Jeff Palkowski. He is a divisional workforce relations manager and divisional disability representative with the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the division of Information Technology. He has worked in human resources, primarily in the public sector for nearly 20 years. His previous HR roles have included HR generalist and business partner, recruitment specialist, compensation analyst, and assistant director of human resources. Jeff's passion for human resources includes giving back to the profession in many ways through networking, mentoring, and his active involvement with the Society for Human Resource Management at the national, state, and local chapter levels. Jeff blogs at hrsushibar.com, and you can also follow him on Twitter or connect with him on LinkedIn. Jeff, thank you so much for jumping on with me today.

- Well, thanks for inviting me. I'm looking forward to this.

- So, Jeff, if you don't know him, is somebody who is kind of a big deal in the Sherm space. You just got announced as part of Sherm's influencer team for this upcoming Sherm annual conference. So I highly encourage you to follow Jeff on all his socials. You'll be able to see those in our show notes. But Jeff, we're really glad to have you on today to talk about some really tough things I think that we're all experiencing when it comes to engagement and motivation and creating great employee experiences. So let's get started. Let's jump in.

- All right, let's go.

- So as you think about ensuring that your employees remain engaged and motivated in the workplace, what are some strategies that you can share to our audience?

- Well, engagement, it's such an important, but I think it's a very complicated issue as well. So I think the number one is don't make it too complicated. I think the number one strategy is have great communication. I mean, obviously, if we're gonna engage, I mean, that almost is the definition of engagement, you're communicating with each other at all levels. So I think that's very important. It's something that we've adapted to as we kind of moved from the all in-person pre-pandemic to now we're kind of in a hybrid, although the majority of us are remote where I work, so we've had to adjust it, but communication has been that one constant that we've had to have throughout the process. So, that's number one. And with that, there's a lot of ways to communicate. So obviously, we've employed a lot of the virtual technologies, kind of like we're talking on today, weekly newsletters, just a lot of ways to make sure that we're all kind of on the same

page and that's just, that's the key to being engaged. And just some examples. So during Covid, we instituted a weekly all staff meeting and I support a division of about 600 employees. So we'll hop on every Friday, and it's something that once we started to move out of the pandemic, we thought about ending, but we found it was such a great engagement tool and not so much the interaction because we would maybe bring a guest in, talk about a topic, but it's that chat that's going along the side. I like to say it almost replaced the water cooler, if you want to go back old school. I mean, it was just a way that people started to have a conversation about what they're doing, their kids, what they're doing this weekend. So, again, a lot of the engagement that I think has been most successful has been that's a little bit more organic, that kind of comes out of the more formal engagement.

- We do something similar internally, and what I always talk about is when we have pets that show up, our chief technology officer, he often has his cat that will come across the screen and the chat just blows up in excitement over that cat. But you're right, it's replaced that quote unquote water cooler, right? That coffee chat. So such a great example. As you have thought about this journey of employee experience and engagement, I think oftentimes we want to talk about too professional development. How do you see professional development kind of engaging or boosting that idea of employee experience?

- Well, again, professional development is something that I think that was... It was definitely something, and I hate to always compare the kind of the pre and post pandemic, but it was such a life-changing, especially in the workplaces that I think professional development has taken kind of a new role now where obviously pre-pandemic, I think it was more about knowledge experience, and now I think a large part of it is kind of the connection and the engagement. So it's not so much a matter of getting new information, but being able to connect with others as well. So I think with professional development, again, it's kind of that bonus that I think we're getting from individuals where it's like, hey, I learned all this great information, but I met all these great people. So again, it's kind of that external engagement. And again, we see that so much. Certainly in HR I see that, but even within the division, I support an IT division, so they go to a lot of IT conferences in that and it's people I think just being locked down for the period of time that we were, people were starved for that. And I think that's helped to improve our own internal engagement, because again, we're now bringing back new ideas, fresh perspectives externally. And again, I think that's something that's helped us to, again, improve our internal engagement by bringing some of those external ideas and things into our organization.

- How do you see technology influencing that engagement piece? And I feel like there's a lot of great resources out there, obviously, like, the big thing is if you're using some sort of community platform, whether it's Facebook marketplace or our internal tool, Paylaw Cities

Community, there's a whole bunch out there. I clearly couldn't name every single collaboration tool out there, but that's been a great resource, both pre-pandemic, current pandemic, endemic, the whole thing. But there's been a lot of advances in technology and I'm curious, obviously supporting IT, how do you see that potentially changing or creating a more positive workplace culture when we think about that experience piece?

- Well, certainly, technology's always been there and I like to think that, again, pre-pandemic, it was kind of a nice to have and oh yeah, let's do this, but I'll be honest, I mean, pre-pandemic, I hardly spent any time on Microsoft Teams, which we use a lot, Zoom, a lot of these tools, and now I can't imagine, particularly since I work primarily in a remote environment, I can't imagine not having those technologies. So the fact that they were there, but now we've embraced them and we've seen advancements in how these tools have continued to be improved, and it becomes more of a part of our, again, our engagement with our employees, keeping connected, I think that's a big part of it. Working in HR, I think a lot of the technological advances that we've seen as well has helped us to help be more engaged with our employees. I mean, we're moving towards a lot of self-service and things where employees could get information real time and that type of thing. Again, it was just things where in the past it was easier to walk down to HR and ask for a pay start. I mean, now, with the tools out there, we don't hear from as many people and that's not... But usually when we do, we're freed up to do more of the in-depth things that we need to deal with with our employees and not so much the routine which now technology has kind of taken over. And now, I can only imagine as we're kind of on the cusp of watching AI and Chat GPT and all these that, what things are gonna look like even five years from now. So it's exciting. Maybe a little bit scary, but I don't know that I'll be replaced. But again, just watching the technological advances, again, it seems like technology, whenever there's a need, technology is always there to kind of save the day and we kind of saw that with the pandemic and now that we've moved out of it, just kind of watching what our next technological advances are gonna be.

- Yeah, I'm excited to see what's coming, and I agree, there is a part of me that originally I think was a little bit scared about some of this advancement in AI and what we've come to see is that it's actually freed us up from an HR perspective to be more strategic, to provide more valuable... To lean into some skills that we haven't been able to leverage because we've been so buried in that administrative stuff. When you have bots being able to answer how much PTO I have left, right? That really frees you up to be able to have deeper conversations. I want to switch gears just a little bit, but kind of still stay in the same vein of thinking about culture and engagement. I'm curious how you've seen companies create an inclusive culture while keeping up to this rapid changing pace of work. And I'd love if you could wrap in, if you have experience with it, is inclusivity from

that perspective as not just culturally, but from that hourly worker who's been onsite to your knowledge worker who's got all these opportunities for flexibility. I don't think we're talking about that enough.

- No, absolutely. And certainly, obviously we've talked a lot about the pandemic since it had such an effect on us, but in the middle of all of that too, we dealt with a lot of DEI issues as well, obviously, and those came to the forefront and all organizations, obviously it's always been there, but then it basically came to the forefront and a lot of organizations kind of shifted and decided to make it, which is a good thing, make it more of a priority. So I think by emphasizing DEI and all of our communications and just making it a part of everything we do, I like to say that when we reach a time where DEI... It's like, we're not talking about DEI, but it's just part of the culture, you know? And that's kind of the goal. And again, it's always going to be a work in progress, when we're dealing with humans, obviously, which is a good thing. We're dealing with diverse humans, but certainly, it takes a lot of getting back to that communication, the understanding. So, I mean, a lot of ways that I think we've embraced diversity is, again, it's not talking about it, but actually seeing it in action. I think, again, as employees were kind of starved for connection in that, we saw a lot of development of affinity groups and individuals reaching out and book clubs, book clubs related to diversity, and I think we saw a lot of things like that kind of come out of, again, some of the positives that came out of the pandemic, and I think that's just one way that we've been able to watch that kind of grow as the connections grow. Diversities is something that hopefully hand in hand that grows as we become. And we became, to talk about kind of the different work styles, we became a much more diverse organization in that with a kind of shift to the hybrid and remote work, we've expanded our applicant pool, for example, and we were typically hiring everyone locally and we have a fair number of employees all across the country now that have never set foot in our physical office. So that's created a lot of diversity just in terms of having employees in all these different time zones in different areas and bringing their perspectives and kind of teaching... We're based in Wisconsin, so they're learning all about us, but they may be out in... I mean, we have employees in Alaska, both coasts, and it's just... So just the diversity of our workforce has been something that's been exciting as well.

- How have you tackled keeping all those people engaged, working remotely? I mean, we've talked about that before, but I'm always curious different perspectives because I think there's the go-tos, right? The happy hour, the coffee chats, that kind of stuff. But is there anything creative you guys have done to help engage that remote workforce?

- Well, you touched on that. Obviously, there's a lot of things that

are kind of on the calendar that we do, so they'll be the check-ins, they'll be the team meetings, all of those types of things. I think the things that have been most interesting are those that just kind of, the organic ones that kind of developed where, as you have these meetings, and as I mentioned earlier, where we could have an office hour with hundreds of people on and the connections will be made in chat and then what happens, something organically will come from that. As I mentioned, book clubs. People will be talking about movies they saw or travels and that, and all of a sudden, that's kind of organically developed into a group that talks about camping, for example. We find all these people have these shared interests. So, again, I may sound redundant here, but I keep coming back to communication. It's just by learning about others within our organization, that has kind of drawn people together. And with that, yeah, I'll give you an example. Our last Friday meeting, we were talking about camping. Well, a lot of people were talking about camping locally in our Wisconsin here, but again, we have employees that are other states talking about the Grand Canyon and other areas, and it's like, wow. So that's just been a way to kind of keep that connection. And again, I think we've developed a lot of, I'll say remote friendships in that way, because people find that they are connected, even if they're not sitting in the cubicle over, but might be two time zones away.

- Is there anything you've learned as you've tackled communicating differently, right? You introduced this new meeting. Is there anything you've learned that you're like, yeah, we should have done that a lot sooner, I can't believe we didn't do that from a communication perspective, or maybe there's feedback you've gotten from your employees that say, hey, we really like communication this way, but this way isn't working? I'm curious if you've uncovered any communication nuggets from a HR professional's perspective.

- Well, definitely. And I think when we talk about communication, again, the important thing to remember is one size doesn't fit all, right? What we learned very quickly. I mean, even something as simple as employees not comfortable having their camera on, for example, in a Zoom meeting, and it's, , I want to mandate it, it's like, no, obviously we want people to be comfortable and that. So, we learned a lot about communication styles, I think, by basically, I guess I'll say being forced to use the same medium, whether it's Zoom or Teams or something like that. So that certainly helped us realize that oftentimes we have to adjust communication. I think there are still challenges now, but I think there were a lot more challenges when we pivoted back in 2020 to an all virtual environment. So I think that's a big part of it, just kind of understanding and embracing that we're all different. It kind of gets back to that diversity that there's different ways to communicate. The one thing I will say, I think in many, many instances, and I'll say that for my own team, I think we're actually more connected and closer than we were when we were actually

sitting in the office together, because our HR team is in a suite and literally we're in our own offices or in a cubicle and you may not even talk to anybody, but now, messages pop up all day, we'll do a quick group chat or something, get together, a lot of those things didn't happen when we were actually in the office. I think it was a little bit more uncomfortable maybe getting up and knocking on someone's door or walking in, whereas now, you can just shoot them a message and then they'll respond when they're comfortable. So in some ways, I think... Yeah, I think in some ways, at least our team, we're probably more connected than we were in the physical environment.

- I have found for myself, personally, that when we get into Zoom meetings now, that there's always a component of how's your day going? What's going on with your family? Or what are you experiencing? And I don't know that we always had that when we were in person, but it feels awkward to not do it when you're virtual. It feels awkward just to jump into your meeting. So in a way, I think it's, like you said, it's kind of forced us to communicate differently and think about our social interactions in a new way, which has been a good challenge, for sure.

- Exactly. And I almost like, I'll call it like a Zoom etiquette, where exactly, it's like no one just jumps into a meeting. It's usually five minutes or so about how... Like today, it's Monday, so everybody's talking about... I had several meetings this morning, talk about our weekends, what did you do? Can you believe it snowed on Saturday and all those types of things we talk about. But then, the other thing that you think about this too that I really didn't think about till I was actually on a meeting with my whole team, it's like, with everyone's little pictures up, you're actually looking at everybody, whereas in a meeting in a physical setting, depending on how the room's configured and stuff, I mean, right now you know when I'm talking. Typically, their screen pops up and you have everyone's attention, and that doesn't always happen when you're in a room and the chairs might be configured a different way, you're back to someone. And again, it's hard to believe that a virtual environment might even have more connection than, again, a physical environment where you're actually in the same room together.

- What a great challenge for those listening that your virtual environment might create more connection. I absolutely love that. How have you, and I want to switch topics a little bit, I want to talk about data. I think that, as HR professionals, this is something we need to grow in this space of data, reading data, telling stories with data. I'm curious what you've done in your space in how you're leveraging data to make decisions on employee experience or employee engagement.

- Well, and you just read this recently and I think it was, I have to think about it, I think it was Peter Drucker who said, you can't

improve what you don't measure.

- Yeah.

- And we've taken that to heart. And as we were talking earlier about AI and things like that, I think we're creating a lot more data than we were three years ago before the pandemic, because I think we've been able to automate some tasks, remove some tasks, and now in the HR world, we've created a much more robust dashboard, for example, for our recruiting efforts. I work a lot with medical leave, so I mean, being able to track hours, I mean, we're doing so much more than we were previously, and I think a lot of it is having the time to do it now. And I think a lot of... This kind of gets back to the productivity. I think a lot of us that work in a remote environment find we're actually more productive, have more time to do things like produce data and then analyze data. So we are doing a lot more of that. It certainly helps us to identify trends and patterns in a lot of things that are going on, because if you tie it in with the employee engagement, engagement's great, but then what is the benefit of it? And it's really looking to, are we more productive? Are we hitting those marks to actually show that, yes, there's engagement and here's what it's resulting in? So yeah, I think we're definitely collecting a lot of quantitative data, but I'll also say we've done a lot recently and we're actually in the middle of a part two of a climate survey. So an all employee climate survey because that information as well, and that kind of helps us a little bit from the engagement side to find out where our employees are, and we're working with Gallup on it, so it's a very robust survey and we're getting a lot of data from that that, again, once we get the results back from that, hopefully that's gonna provide us, again, with some of those trends and patterns that we can look at to now continue to adjust our approach in areas like engagement and diversity inclusion in all the things that help us become a better organization.

- Do you typically look at that data and I guess, does it influence how you think about maybe your benefit offerings or your policies or even your core values? Like do you typically use your climate surveys for that?

- I think definitely, depending on the data that comes back, I mean, it really depends on what the data's saying to us, and as we know, you know, data's not always accurate and we don't want to overreact for it as well, but when you talk about benefit offerings, we recently did a benefit survey as well to find out, because I work in the public sector, we like to think we have a great slate of benefits, which I think we do, but there's always more, and as the population changes, one of the big ones, and Shari, I know you've seen this because we go to a lot of the same conferences, I can't believe how pet insurance has become a priority now and that's like at the top of a lot of lists and you really wouldn't think about that, but I mean, you know,

something like that and then even a lot of us are in the, they call the sandwich generation where we're caring for our kids and we're caring for our parents, so elder care things. So again, that's more data that we really wouldn't think of, but now we're seeing more and more people responding to surveys like that. So I would've never thought five years ago, if you said, yeah, pet insurance is something that we're seriously looking at to see if that's something we might want to offer, because it's what we find. And again, we find that a lot in our Zoom calls. Our pets are in our background and it's like, wow, is that pet insured? So yeah, it's like, we learn a lot when we get the data back. Sometimes there's surprises and that's certainly one that was a surprise to us.

- Yeah, I think all those pets are those pandemic puppies we all bought. That's true.

- I know I am guilty of that 100%. So as we wrap up our conversation, Jeff, I'm curious, as you think forward to the future of work and everything that's changing and continues to change and be influenced by things like remote work and hybrid and flexibility and gig economy and all of the things, how do you, or what advice do you have for HR professionals who are looking to encourage some of the stuff we talked about, like communication, collaboration, teamwork, innovation? Is there advice that you have on tackling that and building a culture where those things can thrive?

- Well, the one advice that I would give and I think this kind of points directly to employee engagement, I just think it's so important to understand, and I come back to the one size doesn't fit all, I've seen a lot of situations where with all the best intentions, you have leaders come back and I see two of the biggest... So I don't know if this is advice to give, but this is probably things not to do. I mean, two things that I've seen that I've seen leaders do and I think as HR professionals, we need to be there to advise them not to do this. Number one is not leading by example. I think a lot of times I've seen leaders try to put in something that they think, oh, this is what the employees want. I'm going to improve their engagement. I'm going to do this and not demonstrate that behavior themselves. People see through that. They can see through something that's done for show. So number one, that's probably the most important thing that we need to have the buy-in, starting with the leadership, they're setting the direction, people see them as leaders. So as HR professionals, we want to make sure that we're communicating that. Back to the one size fits all. Another thing I've seen a lot of leaders do is they'll go to a conference, they'll read something in Harvard Business Review, they'll talk to a fellow C-suite person and something's working great somewhere else and it's like, let's take that exact thing and bring it back to organization and just plug it in, work there, and that's another thing where it's like, each organization is different. And I hear a lot of stories. I hear some great things at other companies,

very innovative things, and I'm like, there is no way it will work in our organization. I mean, some smaller companies that might have a lot more flexibility where you can come and go as you please, we don't worry about dress codes, we've thrown away the employee handbook. All sounds great, it works for them. I can tell you for some organizations it's not going to. So to say that just because it worked well somewhere else that I'm gonna bring it back and just kind of make it work, I mean, that's just another piece of advice that I think as HR professionals and as leaders, we need to understand our organization and make sure what we're doing aligns with that organization, with our mission and not try to take someone else's idea and just like, just kind of throw it in here and say, yep, it worked there, it'll work here.

- Love that. Yeah, definitely not a one size fits all approach in so many aspects of our job. So Jeff, thanks for taking a few minutes of your day to chat with me.

- You bet. Thank you so much.

- I hope you enjoyed today's episode. You can find show notes and links at the HRmixtape.com. Come back often and please subscribe, rate and review.