

Beyond the Desk: Transforming Employee Experience for Deskless Teams in the Modern Workplace with Becca Short

00:02.346-00:17.333 Announcer: You're listening to the HR Mixtape. 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.
00:17.753-00:25.957 Shari Simpson: Joining me today is Becca Short. She leads people strategy at 88 Acres, creating an inclusive and engaged workforce for the growing snack food manufacturer.

00:29.434-01:10.012 Shari Simpson: Becca, thanks so much for jumping on the podcast with me. Thank you so much for having me. So we are talking about being deskless and not being disconnected. And I love this topic because so many times I've talked to people who are maybe in manufacturing or frontline workers or, you know, having that kind of role. And there's a lot of excuses around them. So I guess we'll start with this. When you talk about or have that conversation around remote work, it often excludes that frontline or deskless employee. What are your thoughts on that? How do we start to think differently? I know that's a big question to get us started.

01:10.734-01:54.007 Becca Short: Yeah, I think it's, you know, where the narrative kind of boils down with like remote working or flexible working schedules is that key word of flexibility. That's what people are looking for is flexibility. And I think right now, flexibility is synonymous with a hybrid work schedule or working from home, you know, as it does accommodate, you know, people's schedules and it, you know, it is flexible. However, there's a whole, whole group of people out in the workforce that have to come into a physical workspace to do their job. So I think what is being left out of the overall narrative of flexibility is how do we provide flexibility to those people because they want it too. And it looks different, obviously. So, yeah.

01:54.427-02:21.406 Shari Simpson: What are some ways that you have seen people start to introduce that into that population? I know that one of the things I've talked about in the past is if you allow shift swapping, for example, that you use your HCM platform to allow your employees to kind of manage that instead of having to go through a process with your manager. But that is such a very, very simple example. I'm sure you have a lot more that fall into how we should think about flexibility for this group.

02:21.986-03:37.690 Becca Short: Yeah, I think, well, I was going to say shift swapping, I think, is a big one because it allows people to accommodate things like doctor's appointments and child care issues and those things that pop up that those who can work remotely or have those hybrid schedules are very easily allowed, like able to pivot and accommodate. From my perspective, you know, where I am, a lot of our flexibility comes from the day to day. We have to have employees that work certain shift times. We have to have a certain number of employees on the shift. So even shift swapping can get challenging and stuff. So it's like, how do we tie in flexibility into like people's day to day work? For us that comes down to like job rotation,

which sounds really simple and straightforward. But I don't know if anyone, you know, listening has ever worked in retail or, you know, done anything frontlines. Sometimes you're like at the register all day when you work in retail. And it's like, oh, man, if I could just like, bounce around, go out to the floor, like do different things like, like that amount of flexibility within itself is really great. And then I think also looking at like progression planning is also a great way to allow flexibility and allow for even more like internal job rotation. So that's kind of how I am looking at it right now is like we can't be flexible in other ways, but how can we make the day to day more flexible?

03:38.726-04:11.011 Shari Simpson: Love that example. In a former life in college, I did a brief holiday season at Victoria's Secret and I thought I was going to be on the front floor. I was not. I was in the back stocking for eight hours a day. And I got to tell you, there had been some flexibility there. I really appreciated it. As you have worked with leaders to kind of think about this differently. What are some of the pushbacks you're getting when it comes to defining flexibility in this way?

04:12.211-05:01.923 Becca Short: Yeah, I think a lot of times it's, you know, thinking about flexibility for this group is really hard and you have to be really creative and you end up kind of fighting the narrative of like, well, this is the way we've always done it. Right. Like that's that's what comes up is like, well, we've always we've never allowed shift swapping before. We've never allowed people to rotate jobs before. This is just the way that it's been. So you kind of, I think a lot of the pushback is like just opening the minds to improving that, allowing this type of flexibility and changing the way that maybe we've done things in the past is actually going to improve the employee experience. It's going to increase retention. It's going to increase job satisfaction, like all those things that we care about. It's going to have a positive impact on that. So I think once you can kind of speak to the ROI, that helps like with the mental block that some people have with getting creative with these solutions.

05:03.124-05:23.817 Shari Simpson: Let's talk about employee experience for a minute. Communication is a huge part of having a good employee experience, being informed, being as transparent as you can be as an organization. How does communication look differently with this group? Because they're not running in and checking their emails every day, or they're not on Teams or Slack. It's a very different approach.

05:24.813-06:37.397 Becca Short: Yes, it is. And I think, you know, as an HR leader in that space, I don't, don't, or I do envy to an extent those that can just like blast out an email and say, you know, everyone's going to read this. It's going to be really easy. There's so many layers to the communication when you work with like a desk list team. So for us, we focus on the richest form of communication, which is face-to-face. So that requires a lot of work on my part to make sure that the leaders that are doing that have the right message,

know what they're communicating, know the why behind it so they can do their best to relay the message to their team. You know, that's what's primary. But we do also utilize technology. So we have our HCM has a platform that kind of mimics like a social media feed. And so we're able to blast communication on that. Employees get a notification to the app. But we don't do that doesn't stand alone. We never blast anything out on that. That's like so important. Like, oh, open enrollments now. Like, no, no. We can also be verbally telling these teams and we can't just completely rely on that, that they're checking that. So it's kind of like a dual thing where from our admin team, you can't just send an email and say, here's what open enrollment is and trust that that's going to be like read and received.

06:38.058-06:55.460 Shari Simpson: Is there any creative tactics you've seen in this space? I know in a role that I had, we used to, and I joked about this before in the podcast, but we used to stick flyers on the back of the bathroom doors for communication. Is that something that still happens or is there other creative things that we've kind of evolved to?

06:56.141-07:43.685 Becca Short: You know, we do still do that. I think like a unique challenge that I face and I don't think is unique in manufacturing and retail and those things is actually having a variety of languages. So a lot of our workforce, English is not their primary language. So we supplement that rich verbal communication and the electronic communication with the physical space reminders as well in a variety of languages. And we also, you know, I, I think what's also important as an HR leader is to be the one communicating the mess like the message some of the time. So I'll go out to the production floor or people, you know, my needs to go out to the job site, and actually be the one sharing the message. So I think that's like an extra step that, you know, can help in the communication to make sure it's

07:44.065-08:19.098 Shari Simpson: I agree. I think there's so much value in showing up that way and being able to lend a voice to the message that's being sent. You know, you brought up something that's really interesting is the language complications that you potentially have to deal with with a workforce like that. And it made me think about training and development in general for a deskless workforce. How are you tackling that? I guess one, from the perspective of making sure that there's flexibility there so you can cover everybody. And then two, if you do have some of those language considerations, how do you plan for that? How do you tackle that?

08:19.979-09:53.989 Becca Short: Yeah, so for the first part, the key for this is making sure that the operations managers that I work with are understanding the ROI of whatever training that we're doing. So it's like getting everyone on the same page about why this training is important in the first place, because sometimes the trainings are disruptive to production flow or the workday. You know, there's trainings that we have to do, you know, during work time. Those, you know, that's when employees are here. That's when they have to do it. So making sure that everyone's on the same page about why it's

important. And then it's just down to communication with those those key stakeholders of like, you know, really far in advance saying, OK, in March, we have to do annual sexual harassment training. Everyone has to attend. So I'm going to tell you months in advance so you can plan your production schedule or the team that you're going to have in that day to make sure that we can hit everybody. We do also utilizing an LMS has been huge for us. So we have been able to push out trainings and resources for people that they can do in their own time on work time. but that they can't execute it. So that's been very helpful with language differences. I mean, for us to just be able to record stuff in an alternative language and post it to be done. And we also just, you know, we have to have the expense of hiring translators. And so that's what we do a lot of the time when we have to do like those in-person trainings. We make sure that we have the people that we need to communicate the message. And it's really important for our team and it's greatly appreciated by them that we go out of our way to make sure that they're hearing the message in the language that's best for them.

09:54.810-10:07.160 Shari Simpson: Did you have to invest in, for lack of a better description, a computer lab for some of the access to LMS? Since, again, we're talking deskless. These people don't have, you know, regular access in their day to day.

10:07.761-10:42.752 Becca Short: No, we are completely dependent on people using their smartphones. Again, we're just like super lucky with the HCM that we have that we have this capability for employees to be able to go in, watch a video, complete a training, do their little quiz all right from their phone. Which is great because I think, you know, again, speaking to our team, that next level of technology can be challenging. But everyone's super comfortable with their phone. It's really easy. It's convenient. You know, people can do it in the break room and then we don't have to make that additional technology investment, you know, for like a computer lab. But yeah, for sure.

10:43.593-11:16.733 Shari Simpson: How have you tackled the concepts of morale? And I think back to when the pandemic was at its height and you had all of these employees who were essential, right? They're on our manufacturing floors, they're in our grocery stores, and they're dealing with everything everybody else in the world is dealing with. But they're wearing masks and having to go produce. So that's a dramatic example, obviously, but I think it lends itself to, you know, morale and engagement looks different with this group. Mm hmm.

11:17.493-12:50.965 Becca Short: Yeah. I mean, it's an extreme example. Right. The pandemic. But that was that happened. That was the reality. And so, yeah, it's definitely something that we keep in mind. And it's something that I think still lingers with these teams as they don't forget that experience that they went through and how hard they had to work then. So. Yeah, morale definitely looks different for this type of team. You have to think about, you know, the motivating factors for deskless workers can be different for administrative workers. You know, flexibility is a perfect example. I think for a lot

of like administrative workers, that flexibility is a key component for retention. It's a big driver for engagement. And obviously, that's not the case on this side. So, yeah, we really focus on our end of like career development. That's where we dial in. We, you know, we're picking out that key talent and focusing on them and giving people the opportunity, you know, to progress with the company. So we're showing them that we are invested in them and care about them. And then I think also just really dialing into the employee voice. So taking the time to hear what these team members are actually thinking and feeling. You know, we do that through surveys, but I also do it through focus groups and just going out to the floor again and talking to the team and hearing what they have to say. And then the key piece, obviously, is actually doing something with that information and not just collecting it, but making the changes and doing what you can to make adjustments for that team. And I think that goes a long way in building morale for people to feel like, hey, I'm the one actually doing the work. I'm the one on the front line. Can you hear what I have to say about this? And then actually, actually doing it as much as we can.

12:51.903-13:00.968 Shari Simpson: Do you have specific metrics that you pay attention to that might be different than, you know, a knowledge worker who sits at a desk all day when it comes to engagement?

13:01.758-13:36.432 Becca Short: Yeah, attendance is actually one. So we're really dialing in on what is the purpose behind some of the unexpected absences that we might have, kind of associating those with patterns that we might have in production. Are we having a lot more people call out during times that we're really, really busy? So not only is that challenging from a production standpoint, but is that telling us that maybe we don't have enough staff, that people are feeling burnt out during this time, so they're calling out more? So that's definitely something that we that we are focusing on in terms of like measuring that that level of engagement with our team.

13:36.612-13:58.678 Shari Simpson: For those that are in a career development path, like you talked about, what does that development look like for them? What are their growth opportunities and how do you address that? Because not every person who is a deskless employee, the ultimate goal isn't to make them a desk employee. So growth looks looks differently. So how do you have those conversations about what their development looks like?

13:59.258-15:01.538 Becca Short: What might be missed sometimes with this group of people is like actually asking them what they want in the same way that we ask other, you know, employees, like, what do you want your career path to look like? That might be a little more defined. And so during our review process and our quarterly check ins, that's a huge piece as we just take the time to ask our employees, what else do you want to learn? What else are you interested in that we do at the company that you're not doing now? And then creating that pathway and also focusing on pathways that don't always end up at people management. So there's lots of ways that people can grow and

develop that's not just leading people. Not only do people not always want to lead people, but you can only have so many people leaders in a workplace anyways. So it's figuring out those other pathways that are elevation, upskilling, that's valuable to both the company and that employee for their time here. And whenever they may or may not choose to move on, they're upskilling themselves, but not just focusing on the people management piece. That's such a good point.

15:01.698-15:50.581 Shari Simpson: So many times we have that in our head that this that we're kind of still stuck on that ladder view of development where it's like, OK, great. Now I'm a senior person. I'm a manager. Now I'm a senior manager. And you're absolutely right. Some people do not have that drive. They know themselves enough and just know that that's not where their passion lies. So I love hearing that, that your organization is taking that into account and really thinking more broadly about what development looks like. You know, as you have worked with this group and you've thought about the flexibility engagement, what do rewards and recognition look like in your org? And I'm always curious to find this out because I think with this population especially, you have to get really creative. So I'd love to hear some of the things that you're doing and maybe some of our listeners can walk away with some new ideas.

15:51.201-17:02.245 Becca Short: Yeah, yeah. I mean, I think this is something that we are still figuring out in terms of what really works for our team for a lot of different reasons. But, you know, some of the challenges that we face are, you know, I think a lot of times when people think of like rewards and recognition, there's always like compensation and those types of things. But the other pieces that are like company events where, you know, we're like having a holiday party or we're all going to go to this place and do this fun activity together. When you're a 24-5 operation, it's almost impossible to figure out a time that works for the whole team. So we really have to think about, okay, what else can we do on site that works for our team? How can this work for everyone, both our admin team and our production team? So to be honest, I don't have a solution that would work for everybody. I think the key is, really getting creative and knowing that, you know, when you work with both of these groups, you're going to have to put in a little bit of extra work to figure out something that's that's going to work and just like staying open and knowing that that is like part of the responsibility being an HR professional when you work with these teams.

17:03.502-18:32.143 Shari Simpson: The organization that I had mentioned earlier, the one that we put the flyers up in the bathroom, one of the ways that they really connected the desk employee with the deskless employee is every salary employee was required to go and deliver groceries. It was a grocery delivery company for one day as part of their orientation. It was amazing and hilarious all at the same time, because you have these people who might be a high-level IT person who are out in the truck for the whole day, and it just gave this really great perspective of what the frontline worker is dealing with on an everyday basis, and help to inform your job as a desk

employee on how to best support them, because really, they were the face of the business, right? That's who our clients were seeing at the time. So, so I love that the idea of around just getting really specific and thinking about the group that you're supporting. And it might vary per shift. I know that in this organization it did. You know, first shift employees were kind of had a different kind of camaraderie than our overnight employee. It just had a different vibe, you know, so you had to be really sensitive to that. I wanna talk about decision making and input from frontline employees. I think sometimes they get lost in the shuffle of not really asking their opinion. You've brought it up a couple times, but I'm curious, have you surveyed the employees and have found something that you're like, you know what, this actually had a big impact on our business or we made a change based on the data that we got from this group?

18:33.214-20:17.435 Becca Short: Yeah, so I think one way to like really get these teams involved are like employee resource groups. Again, you can still run into the issue of like, I have people across three shifts, we can't have a common time for employee resource groups. So I have depended on surveys a lot of time to get that to get feedback. I think what came out of it most for us was the like daily job rotation. So, you know, previously we had most of our team kind of came in and did the same thing every day because they were really good at it. And we were being really efficient that way. But through that survey, we kind of learned that, well, people aren't as happy as we thought doing that. So we implemented like intern, you know, job rotation. So people are moving around on the production floor and doing different things. And, you know, I first I think we did see some impact to production where it's like people are doing new jobs and they're figuring it out. But once they did, it was like our efficiency went up like crazy because people were not getting so tired or bored or whatever the thing may be that they're doing repetitively. And kind of to go back to your point of people going out and doing the job of the frontline workers, that is something that we have our team do here. You know, in one way or another, they find their way out on the production floor. And it's very humbling. I have worked side by side with our team, and they're like, Becca, just get out of the way. You're not fast enough. And so it is. And that helped me to understand like, wow, this is a really, as good as these people are at doing this, it's a really hard thing to do for eight hours a day. They'll probably be better at it if they get a break. And so we implemented that, and that was huge. And like I said, we've seen tremendous effects on our productivity since doing that.

20:17.975-20:30.086 Shari Simpson: I love that. As we wrap up our conversation, my last question for you is if there is one or two misconceptions that you think exist out there about on-site staff, what would that be?

20:30.146-21:31.321 Becca Short: What would you want our audience to walk away with? Gosh, I think it's just, I don't know if this is a misconception, but I think it's just always remember to keep this group within the conversation. Again, they make up So much of our

workforce, we all depend on frontline workers in one way or another for so many aspects of our lives. So it's just keeping them in mind when we're talking about flexibility. You know, that's how we maintain like inclusion and equity and our workforce is like thinking about all those factors. I think the other piece is that there are plenty of people that still enjoy coming in and doing their jobs. You know, there is some value in that. And, you know, I don't want to I don't want anyone coming at me about, you know, not working from home. I think all of that is fantastic. But there are plenty of people that still love to come in and do what they do. And a lot of those are our friendly workers and our deskless workers. So kind of just remembering that they're all there and they want flexibility, too. So as the H.R. professionals carry on these really important conversations, just like thinking about how we can be inclusive, you know, for the whole workforce.

21:31.561-21:44.035 Shari Simpson: Thank you so much for taking a few minutes of your day to sit and chat with me about the deskless worker. I think there's such an important part of our society. So what a great conversation. Thank you so much. Appreciate it.

21:46.607-21:56.515 Announcer: I hope you enjoyed today's episode. You can find show notes and links at thehrmixtape.com. Come back often and please subscribe, rate, and review.