- 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. ♪ There's no one backup ♪ Now, your host, Shari Simpson.

- Joining me today is Shannon Hardy. With her background in psychology from UCSC and over 10 years in human resources, she leads as the VP of Flex Work at LinkedIn, steering the company through the evolving work environment. She orchestrates strategic initiatives and a key partnership with Microsoft, focusing on the wellbeing of 16,000 global employees in response to the pandemic-induced changes. Shannon's role is a testament to her passion for innovative work solutions and her expertise in fostering creativity and collaboration in the modern workplace. ♪ Bring, bring the back, back ♪ Shannon, welcome to the "HR Mixtape".

- Thank you so much. I'm so excited to be here.

- So, I thought we could start with you sharing a little bit about your role at LinkedIn and how it's really evolved with the shift towards a more flexible work environment that we're seeing.

- Yes, I love this question because I feel like I have had such a jungle gym of a career at LinkedIn, which is really amazing and I'm very blessed to have that position. But I started as a HR business partner at LinkedIn and progressed in that job family and really enjoyed working with our clients. And then, employee relations was added into kind of my remit, which made a lot of sense, I was working really closely with our employment law team and supporting them as an HR business partner. So, it was like a really nice kind of marriage of those two roles. And then, as a piece of the employee relations piece, there was some like incident response, kind of emergency response responsibilities within that remit. And then, the pandemic hit and it was just kind of like kismet where they were like, "Shannon, you have incident response kind of in your remit, do you think that you could lead us through kind of what's happening right now in Asia, but we're not really sure what this means, but maybe put together some framework and some guiding principles and we'll discuss." And so, I did that for the executive team and very quickly we realized that we were entering into a global pandemic. And we still made a lot of assumptions, it's gonna be three months, it's gonna be six months. And I think all of us were hoping that was the case, but soon realized this was gonna be a multi-year journey. And probably maybe a year or a year and a half in, my CEO and I were discussing my role and he said, "You know, Shannon, this has completely transformed the way that people work. It's completely shifted how we think about roles, how we think about location of roles, how we get work done, how we collaborate. I think that this is more. I think that your role is more than just this incident response, I think that your role is actually helping us navigate what LinkedIn is not only gonna do for our employees as we

start to enter out of the pandemic, but kind of have these expectations from our employees around flexibility, around remote work, but also hopefully lead the way in having this discussion with other organizations outside of LinkedIn." And so, that is when he said, "Why don't you write your own job description?"

— I love that, that's like one of my favorite activities.

— Right, and I think again, I'm so blessed to be able to have the opportunity to do that. And I did take a moment when I was writing it and I was like, "This is so unique that I'm getting to write my own job description." And so, I wrote it and I looked at it with my boss, the Chief People Officer at LinkedIn and then I looked at it with our CEO and they said, "Okay, let's do this." And they did kind of take a bet and they did take a chance on this will be important, this is a role, this is meaty, and this is needed. And I think one of the main reasons was really around the coordination, the need to coordinate our approach around flexible work in a way where maybe I was like the conductor and I was helping orchestrate that to come together as an organization and with each of the functions and executives of the functions. And so, my role evolved and it kind of continues to evolve as our approach to flexible work continues to evolve, and that's just been super exciting.

— You talked a lot about the anticipation or maybe the expectation that we all kind of thought the pandemic would be three months, six months, right? We're only gonna have this kind of short window where we have to triage things. We know now that that's not the reality. So, as you've seen this transition to more flexibility, hybrid work, remote work, how has the concept around company culture evolved as well as you've worked through some of these things?

— Absolutely, so company culture is really like the fabric that weaves the employees together. It's that common language, it's kind of the true north of an organization. It's what helps keep employees engaged, to keep them motivated, to keep them tied to the strategic priorities that our organization has. And that company culture is just so critical, especially in this new world of work where we see teams, you know, much more dispersed than before. People moved, they felt like it was an opportunity, you know, with more remote work to be able to maybe move back to see their families or take an opportunity to move to a lower cost location. And I think all of that kind of happened organically during the pandemic. Now, we're looking at it a little bit more with a focus on the business and the needs of the business. But when you have that disbursement, when you have teams kind of going through this evolution and you have definitely a significant increase in remote work, company culture is what brings everyone back together. And so, that culture is so critical to not only be intact but also to shift and change and be agile as the organization changes. And so, you know, especially at LinkedIn, we did a lot of work around kind of re—

engaging everyone, getting everyone excited about our culture, what is our culture? What are those fundamental pillars of our culture? Teaching everyone what that common language was, you know, kind of once we started to really come back to the office and start to kind of like settle back in to this new way of working.

— Your background is pretty unique in that you have psychology and HR expertise. I suspect that there's a lot of people actually in HR who probably have a combination of that background. But with your understanding of human nature, how has that informed your approach in company culture remotely and in really kind of addressing some of the complexities that a hybrid environment has so that you don't have, quote, "A company culture internally or in office and a completely different culture experience if you're remote."

— So, I think, and I love it because I do think I find a lot of my peers come from a psychology background. Maybe we wanna practice, but we wanna practice in a corporate environment. But I think as humans we have this desire to feel included and feel a sense of belonging. Now, whether that is to the team, the immediate team that I'm on, maybe it's a remote community that I belong to, maybe it's the team that I see in the office or project team. And so, when I look at kind of like that human interaction, whether it is virtual or in person, we need to be able to nurture that in certain ways and put a little bit more structure on it. And we started to see some of this happen naturally. So, our remote teams started creating, you know, we use Microsoft tools, Teams channels to be able to communicate with each other. And sometimes it was like a quick, "Hello, how are you?" And sometimes it was, "We would love to get together. If anyone lives in this area, let's go grab a coffee." And we looked at that organic activity and we said, "Wow, this is great, let's build on this," so we created remote communities for each of our of geographic locations in which we have remote employees. And we've been able to kind of bring them together as teams and then we've identified individuals who volunteered to be remote community champions. Those champions are kind of like the leaders of that specific remote community and they can organize events, organize speakers, bring people together as they see fit, and we just love seeing all of that energy. We are also doing a lot of onsite activity for our hybrid employees who come into the office, but we're doing it in a more coordinated way. So, of course, employees, again, they wanna feel included, they wanna belong, but they're also trying to figure out like what is that balance of flexibility and how does that work for them? And so, we started to concentrate specific onsite activities on certain days, like our company all hands is on Wednesday. We encouraged managers and leaders to schedule one-on-ones and staff meetings on Wednesday or maybe Tuesday and Wednesday. We started doing onsite in-office socials on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. And so, we just knew that employees want to come into the office, but they wanna be able to kind of come out of that experience feeling extremely fulfilled, not just, "My boss asked me to come into the office today."

It's like, "You know what? I went to the all hands then I had a staff meeting, then I had a one-on-one with my boss and then I like happened to grab lunch with a couple of people I saw in the office," I'm gonna leave that experience and be like, "That was great." And even for the in-office socials, what we wanted to do is ensure our remote community felt included in that as well. So, we actually have provided them with a stipend that they can spend on a monthly basis or they can get together and use that money to get together to have coffee, you know, maybe to do an event, a team building event, you know, to have happy hour, whatever they see fit. And that's really, we've gotten some really great feedback on that.

- As you've gone through that transition, what are some of the challenges that you've had to overcome or that you maybe didn't even expect would be a challenge that you guys have had to address?

- Yeah, I think that as we first started kind of again coming out of the pandemic and understanding what the transition would look like, what we realized was that we really centered our approach based upon trust. We trust our employees to do what's best for themselves and their teams. And that first phase was focused on employees doing what works best for them. And the kind of continued challenge was we needed to bring back that what works best for the team. And so, it's this balance, this balance of employee-based needs with business needs. And now that, that was a journey. We've been on that journey for a couple of years now and now we are very focused on what works best for teams and the business. And we still absolutely infuse flexibility into all of that, but it is a challenge because you need to evolve your approach. Things will continue to change, your organization will continue to change, but you just need to be able to be open to that change, to address that change. You know, have a change management mindset going into that with a plan of what you think that your organization needs. And then, we really asked our employees for humility. We said, "We know that we're gonna have to experiment over time. Some things are gonna work really well and some things won't work so kind of trust us that we're doing what's best for you and the organization and maybe give us a little bit of grace." And through those challenging times, our employees I think really showed up for us and gave us great feedback and we were able to shift and pivot where we needed to. But I think organizations just need to continue to monitor, experiment, and then move forward. And sometimes that can be challenging, but if you have that right mindset and you ask for some humility, that definitely helps.

- Asking for humility is a point that I haven't heard anybody else talk about yet. And I find that really fascinating because it goes back to this idea around businesses that care, businesses that are showing transparency, businesses that are really thinking about employee-first approach to addressing their business objectives. You know, we're all struggling to figure out how we be great to our

employees, but we still have to worry about the bottom line, right? I mean, that's the reality of the world that we're in. What did your team do to help prepare that middle manager level for all this change and all the conversations that they were gonna need to have with their employees about what was coming and what was gonna be tried?

— We actually started a manager meeting during the pandemic that we did on a monthly basis. And it was really about feeding the managers real-time information because I think everyone was, of course, it's a pandemic, was in a state of panic of what's going on? What are we doing? What does the organization expect of me as I'm working through this difficult time? And the managers overwhelmingly said, "Please keep this, we love this meeting." It's a little informal, there's not a lot of slides, it's multiple speakers, and it's really kind of created this sense of psychological safety for managers to be vulnerable and say, "This is what I need from the organization in order to lead." So, we use these manager meetings to be able to talk them through specific scenarios. So, your employees are gonna wanna know if they can move maybe to another state, maybe to another country. You're gonna have to go through guiding principles on how you make those decisions and talk about that with your manager, right? Your employee may need special accommodations, your employee may need to have a conversation with you about what days they come into the office and the frequency if they're coming into the office because they have childcare needs. And we walk through these specific scenarios with the managers and really kind of role play what they could possibly do, what they should be thinking about, tools, resources, whether that was at the company level or at the functional level. But I think that to your point, we really approached it with a sense of caring. We cared about our manager population, we wanted to communicate to them clearly, frequently, and kind of have a drumbeat of this communication with them and support. And so, we continue to have those manager meetings and we do it regionally so it's appropriate where we have our international offices, and we still see a very significant amount of attendance and people use that as a forum to be able to just ask questions, to get information, and really learn from each other.

— What are some things that you have seen when we think about the evolution of flexible work, major issues that companies need to address to make sure that their culture doesn't suffer? You talked a little bit about this already, right? Make sure that you have really great communication, training, that you actually are being specific to your region, and that kind of stuff. Is there other maybe business-level decisions that need to happen or methodologies that need to be challenged as you think about what flexible work really means and how do we support our employees and meet our business goals at the same time?

— Yeah, I think that there needs to be a constant evaluation, maybe

not constant but consistent evaluation of the needs of the business and the sentiment of the employees. So, you know, we do employee voice surveys, so it's like a pulse survey, and we use that information to understand how are our employees feeling? You know, what are their primary concerns? What are they feeling about specific topics? And identifying those topics. And then, like really diving deep into that data and also seeing how that kind of measures up to how we are performing as an organization. And I think what some organizations may do is kind of optimize for one or the other, but they truly need to be coupled together because what this does is it kind of gives you a heat map to be able to say, "Okay, it's really working well. You know, maybe remote is really working well for this specific team in this specific location, but maybe remote is not working for this team in this specific location." So, why is that? What's going on? How do we unpack that? And how do we ensure that we get ahead of it so that the business doesn't have to make a rash decision, right? And a rash decision could be everybody's in the office, right? And it's these days, you know, it's Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, right? It doesn't matter what meetings are those days or what experiences are on those days, everybody's back to the office. Like we saw a lot of those decisions kind of come out and then we saw them reversed. I think we're seeing them kind of come out again. But I think if you understand what is the business need? We went and we looked at all of our data and what we saw was employees want to collaborate together in person, they wanna have experiences, they wanna nurture and build relationships. And that could be things like mentorship, coaching, one-on-one, staff meetings, you know, lunches, whatever it may be. And they really wanna ensure that they feel like they're tied to our strategic priorities. And so, in doing that, you know, like I said before, we've made that kind of more orchestrated effort to look at that together and ensure that both our hybrid and our employees are very tied to that. And we continue to monitor the business and be able to say, "Okay, these roles are performing really, really well, what's working well there? And where we're having challenges, where can we kind of intervene earlier on and understand that?" So, the more data that you have, whether it's employee sentiment data, business performance data, engagement data, take all of that data together and layer on kind of all of those different lenses so that you truly have like a good pulse on what's happening in the organization. And then, hopefully out of that, recommendations on what you can do to nurture what's working well and then address what's not.

— And this has been such great advice and a really good broad look at some of the things that we're all trying to figure out as we look forward to supporting flexible work environments, hybrid, fully remote. As you look at maybe your crystal ball, what do you think the next challenges are gonna be for us in this space?

— You know, I think that it's going, again, going to continue to evolve, but I also think that businesses are really solidifying the

right disbursement of remote and hybrid roles within their organization, how that ties to geolocation, and then how that will continue to accelerate their own businesses. So, I do think that organizations will be more pointed on these are remote roles and these are remote teams that are high performing, come join us, right? These are the hybrid roles, you know, and we're super excited to have you in our office, come join us. I think that is gonna be where a job seeker might have a little bit of a different experience where they're able to decide, "What is it that I want in regards to that type of flexibility?" I also think that through all of this, employees and workers overall, they have challenged like the ethos and the culture of an organization and they're attracted to organizations that are more aligned with their personal ethos and their kind of personal cultural tenets. And that's gonna be, or something organizations continue to have to ensure that they're front and center talking about their culture, talking about their ethos, talking about what their company cares for. I also think that we will continue to just see an evolution in what employees want on a consistent basis around leadership, right? Leading these dispersed teams, leading teams that look and feel much different than they did before. And like that leadership acumen is so critical, and organizations should really double down on ensuring that their leaders understand and really have a great skill at leading that type of like dynamic team.

— Well, Shannon, like I said, great conversation, so glad we were able to get you on the podcast for a few minutes, I really appreciate it.

— Yes, I loved it. Thank you so much for having me here.

— 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.