

HR Mixtape: Episode with Shari Simpson and Laura Maffucci, Head of HR at Crackle PR

Announcer:

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.

Shari Simpson:

Joining me today is Laura Maffucci, head of HR at Crackle PR, and a people leader known for building development-forward global HR programs. She has led initiatives informed by recent research work with GP on skills, AI, and retention in a power-shifted labor market.

Shari Simpson:

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

Laura Maffucci:

Thank you, Shari. It's great to be here.

Shari Simpson:

So you recently have been utilizing, looking at, leveraging research that's coming out of GP that's really surfacing details around global talent that, you know, HR leaders need to act on immediately. So I'd love to hear a little bit more about that research and what you're seeing come out of it.

Laura Maffucci:

Yeah, you know, some of it, it's really interesting. It's showing that more than half of leaders are really fast-tracking the adoption of automation and technology, knowing that it's just really the way that they're going to survive. They are starting to prioritize AI expertise over other leadership skills and really investing in it. They're also hiring more than you think they are. You

know, I know everyone's, you know, the economy and it seems like jobs with those job markets slowing, but over 90% of them have said that they still are hiring, even if it is only for very critical, strategically important roles. So things are moving up there. They're just moving really fast and people are just trying to keep up.

Shari Simpson:

When I think about AI implementation in HR, I am seeing the rapidness that you're talking about. When I see things coming out of like Josh Burson creating his own kind of AI tool for HR, I think where I get stuck and where our audience gets stuck is, where does AI genuinely improve HR workflows? And where are we still kind of cautious? Because I don't know that we have totally grasped the best places to use it, especially as we talk about, you know, talent, talent acquisition, that space, performance reviews, that space?

Laura Maffucci:

Yeah, you know, I think it's certainly, there's a lot on the people operations side of the house that can greatly benefit from the automation and can greatly benefit from AI. And I think a lot of just thoughts starting, because there's so much writing and communication and things like that that we have to do in HR. And the other place that I know my team is really using it is, you know, there's things like, a lot of that we do, it's a lonely world, HR, and we can't really talk to a lot of people about it and talk through things. So if you're working on a sort of sensitive investigation or situation, you might have a lot of notes, things like that, and need to come up with talking points and things, and we use it as a thought partner. Um, as much as that somewhat scares me to say, because I'm not a huge, I'm a little nervous about where this could potentially go, but it is great. You know, you do an investigation, you take all your notes, uh, you, you put them into your AI and ask it for themes, ask it for something, things you might be missing. Seeing helps us with talking points for hard conversations, scripts for managers, all those sorts of things that. It's sort of that partnership between the AI and the human. It's never going to replace what you need on the human side of that type of interaction. But I do think that that is a really great way for HR to be using AI.

Shari Simpson:

How have you helped your team specifically, and kind of as we think the larger, larger HR space, think about what skills they need to use these tools in this just rapid changing environment?

Laura Maffucci:

Yeah, I think the two most important things to do well in this environment are curiosity and learning agility. and that ability to not just learn something quickly, but very quickly understand how you can apply it to your job. So I'm lucky my team, very curious. I have a couple of people on the team who are particularly passionate about using AI, and I think they're helping along some of the others that might be more hesitant. So I think that is one thing that's really important for any leader is identify the people that you have, And they don't have to be in tech. You know, I've found out there at speaking events, you know, people from non-tech companies are like, well, what do we do? We're not a tech company. We don't have it in-house, you know? Find those people who are passionate about AI. They're the ones that are spending their free time looking into it and trying to learn it and stuff and have them sort of be your champions and your advocates for it and helping others along the way.

Shari Simpson:

That champion concept is so important, and I think it goes back to a little bit of what you were talking about from a skills perspective, right? We shouldn't be necessarily looking at what is your job description, right? Like you said, you might have this entire skill set we don't even know about unless we start having the conversation. We're not going to find that out.

Laura Maffucci:

Mm-hmm. Your best employees are often the best, your best employees, not necessarily because they're best at the, you know, bullet points on the job description. You know, I think that goes to that whole hire what you can't teach sort of thing. And it goes to the curiosity, the learning agility, the connective intelligence, all those other things that just help you be successful that might not have exactly anything to do with the steps of the job description.

Shari Simpson:

How do we, as organizations, switch our mindset to start to build in some of that skills-based hiring slash training? Especially when I think about internal mobility, you know, there is this pressing need that Gen X is really kind of pushing us towards to think about. the design of jobs differently than I think a lot of seasoned HR professionals have been familiar with.

Laura Maffucci:

I think you have to have a very talent-centric approach and really have programs in place where you're understanding the skills and the strengths of the employees that you have outside of the day-to-day job responsibilities. You need to understand who has potential in certain areas, who are your learning agile people, who learn quickly, who can grow, not necessarily from top to bottom, but who can just add to their scope and add to the breadth of their experience to round them out. So I think really making sure that you as an organization have programs in place to assess that talent, but also are enabling your managers and helping them to understand how to assess the people on their team in that way.

Shari Simpson:

How are you seeing the change in technology help with some of those things like talent assessment?

Laura Maffucci:

I think it's really great. The automation that it can provide, the dots that it connect, and the way it can pull in information from multiple different sources,

whether that be from a performance review and pulling it up against a resume, pulling it up against other things that you might have in your HR systems to really evaluate all of those data points together. That can be greatly automated and enhanced without having to go into each piece individually. So I think that that really helps. And I think it all sort of ties in with each other. You know, it's important for people to understand their own just natural biases that they might not be aware of. And these systems have them as well. You know, I know there's a lot of talk right now about, you know, talent acquisition and the bias that can be with AI. But I would argue that that is no more bias than a typical ATS. A typical ATS is going to have knockout words. And if the word isn't in a resume or if a certain box isn't checked and they're going to kick somebody out without the recruiters, you know, looking through, because a lot of the times what a really good recruiter sees on a resume isn't what's written in the resume. It's what all of it pulled together tells them about that person. So, again, I think it's all about us using AI as an extension of our HR teams as opposed to any type of replacement for the work that we're doing.

Shari Simpson:

How do you see that technology impacting things like pay transparency? You know, there's all this change that we've seen out there from something as simple as, you know, you can't ask in a lot of states, you know, compensation questions that you could have asked years ago. But there's still definitely a gap. And one of the things that I'm seeing is that, you know, as organizations have tried to be more transparent about pay, one of the things that I've seen them do is really kind of focus on total compensation statements and really bringing to their employees, you know, in totality, here's the value, get out of this role. But there's a lot of education behind that because that hasn't been the norm. I think most typical employees don't necessarily know how to evaluate that in a way that brings any value to them in their daily life. It's like, great, I got RICs, but they don't invest for, you know, a year. OK, that's just a number on a piece of paper, you know. So how is technology helping to surface and or I guess maybe even hindering some of those pay transparency conversations?

Laura Maffucci:

Yeah, I think where it can help is I think that it can enable organizations to provide things like total compensation statements, because that's a lot of information to compile and calculate and know how to calculate some of those things that don't necessarily have the quantitative stuff right behind it, but you can assign a value to it. So it can enable them to create those statements and get those statements in front of people from a hindrance. I think the hindrance with that ties to something that I think is one of the biggest issues with AI, which is the lack of critical thinking and the lack of discernment and how important that is for all of us, not just in our jobs, but in our daily lives. With AI out there, is what I'm looking at real? Is this true? Does this make sense? And being able to think it through, use your discernment, think critically about it and come to a decision. And I think, you know, you have a lot of crowdsource sites out there where people report pay and people will come in, they'll be like, well, this says that my job should be X, but I paid X and. What they're not understanding, and what we have always done a lot of education on and continue to do, is you don't know exactly what that data is for. Somebody can go, a title is a title is a title. It doesn't necessarily mean the person with the same title is doing the same thing. People inflate their titles. People might report their base plus their bonus. People might just report their base. You don't know what's in that information, so it's understanding how to maybe look at that more directionally, or like as a gut check, as opposed to, well, Glassdoor says I should be making this, so I should be making this. So it goes to that education and understanding that not everything you find online is real.

Shari Simpson:

I like that you brought up, well, two things. One, titles. You know, if you've been in HR for a hot second, you know that an HR business partner in one organization could be what I would consider a generalist, and they could be almost your highest level of HR. So you're absolutely right. Titles are definitely not an accurate representation of the scope of your role. The other thing you talked about, though, is this concept around not losing our critical thinking skills. And I don't know that I've talked to an organization yet that has started to weave that into their training plan alongside their AI development.

Especially because we know that AI has a very reaffirming way of talking to you. You know, it's not a dissenter in the information. I want you to go back to it, and you're not going to go back to it if it's not agreeing with you. Right, right. Have you seen any organizations starting to implement critical thinking training as well?

Laura Maffucci:

I haven't seen that formally but I know that what we're doing is we have an AI council and a lot of the focus of that is the policy because that's something that I don't think you can put your AI policy in place and then just leave it. We review ours like every month because things change so much. And security and making sure that the security around all of the tools that the organization is adopting but a huge, huge focus of what we're doing is enablement. And part of that enablement is education, how to use tools, how to adopt the tools, giving each other tips and things like that. And that critical thinking and that discernment, we sort of speak to that within our guidance for employees and how we're enabling them, helping them to understand how important that is. And I think the more organizations do that just as part of their general AI adoption, the better off everyone's going to be both at work and outside of work.

Shari Simpson:

Yeah. I want to go back to the research for a little bit. You know, it seems like there's this rapid movement. Well, there is. There is this rapid movement. But organizations aren't necessarily moving as quickly as the technology is moving. What are some steps, if you think about the audience that we're talking to today, what can they do right now beyond policy? Because I agree, like, you got to get the policy first. That's a table stakes. You know, we've talked about that before. What's the next step? You have the policy in place. Now, what do you do?

Laura Maffucci:

You have to pay attention and pay attention to what's out there. Listen, listen to what your employees are saying, what they're seeing, what they're finding when they're reaching out saying, I found this new tool that I would like to try.

And it's something new, really paying attention to that and thinking through, okay, are we going to see something like this in another function or another area, some similar type of AI? It's really having to stay, it's just really having to stay on top of things and not losing that curiosity again, and making sure you're listening to people and realizing you have to make a conscious effort, I think, to re-review that policy every month, whether you think something new has come out or not, because something might catch your eye and you'll say, oh, oh, I missed that. You could even have AI review the policy.

Shari Simpson:

Yeah, that's such a good point. You know, one of the things that I often do with chat GPT is I'm trying to, to work through writing a prompt for something, you know, something complex. And so, you know, at first, I would kind of go down the Google rabbit hole and see if somebody had already written a prompt or whatever. And then I was like, why am I not just asking the tool to help me write the prompt for the tool? It is such a time saver. And I'll say, here's what I'm trying to accomplish. I'm really not sure how to ask you to do it. Can you ask me questions? And then at the end, can you give me a prompt to give back to you? Huge time saver, but it doesn't, that's not how our brains necessarily work in that circular fashion. So it goes back to using it as a tool, as a resource.

Laura Maffucci:

Yeah, that's really important. And for organizations that do have AI teams who are building AI or specifically focused on AI, engage with them because they're usually your most passionate advocates for AI and they love talking about it. They love helping people with it. So we do office hours and folks from our AI team will join and they'll help people learn how to prompt. You know, when we first, we implemented an organization-wide enterprise AI solution because we didn't want people just going out to chat GPT and confidential information, just making sure our data was secure, but everyone complained at first because it wasn't as good. And it was like, well, is it not as good or are you not prompting it right? And so we really focused on the prompting initiatives and that's been a huge help for people.

Shari Simpson:

So that's a good example of kind of like an experiment that you decided to do internally. What are maybe some other little experiments that HR should be considering when it comes to using these kinds of tools?

Laura Maffucci:

We have what we call the AI Awesomeness Awards, and you can nominate yourself or you can nominate someone else for their use of AI and how it's benefited a process or their work somehow. And we have different categories. We have like, is it helping the business scale? Is it showing experimentation? There's a few of them. And we have a points-based recognition system. And so every couple of weeks, we are reviewing the nominations for that. And we publicize it in the newsletter so people know that it's out there. And it's really taken off. It's really gotten people excited.

Shari Simpson:

Well, and how cool to start linking it to pulling away the fear, pulling away the, you know, making sure that people know that they can innovate, that, again, you have a policy in place, so I want to make sure I kind of go back to that, right? Because, like, you have to have that framework to begin with. But what a fun way to start to highlight some of the awesome work coming out of the organization. And in such a way where you're not punishing people or giving them a consequence for making something more efficient in their job, you know, that's huge. Because I think there is a fear out there for some people is like, well, if I develop a new process that gives me 10 hours a week back, did I just you know, get myself out of a job.

Laura Maffucci:

Nope. It's the people. I think it's like any new technology or any type of situation where things are changing around you when you're at work. You often see people, they make the systems and the processes that they work with, their value and their identity. I've had, I've worked in the HRAS space for a long time and I've had HRS managers that I've had to say to, well, they hate the system. They don't hate you because, you know, they so equate it. And so people build these processes and they think, you know, especially people

who've been in one job for a really long time and they think that, well, if this goes away, I need to go away. So they need to cling on keeping it the same and they don't want to change. But that's the best way to ensure that you're not going to be okay and that you aren't going to be needed. You need to continually be evolving so that you're what's adding value and you haven't just built this thing around yourself that people just okay. We just got to get rid of that and you've got to go with it and we'll figure this out in a new way. So it's like let go or be dragged, you know. You've got to embrace it. It's not going away. Even if you hate it, and I have my own reservations about it, it's here. It's like social media. You know, it's like when your kid does something stupid on Instagram and, you know, your first instinct might be, oh, well, take away the phone, take away the social media. No, it's a teaching moment. You need to teach them how to use it and how to use it responsibly because it's going to be a part of their life. You can't hide from it.

Shari Simpson:

Yeah, I think about when we started to use chat more regularly inside of our organizations. I kind of equate that to that is that there was a little bit of education where we had to say, yes, while this acts like a text message on your phone and it's instant. You shouldn't treat it necessarily the same way you treat texting your friends. It's still corporate communication. And I don't think in that scenario there was a lot of like, oh my gosh, like, you know, pushback from that. This is just one more of those things that we have to think about. How do we provide the right framework without squashing creativity? That, that's honestly my biggest fear in, in all the conversations I've had around AI and the use of it is this balance between using it and, and also creating fear at the same time. Because that's not, you're not going to get the innovation. You're not going to get people who are going to push to change process. You're just, you're not going to create that environment.

Laura Maffucci:

Right. Absolutely. Absolutely.

Shari Simpson:

So I want to, I want to ask a little around how we think about career

frameworks a little bit differently now. Now that we have this in place, now that, you know, our roles in HR are evolving, you know, we're starting to hear whispers of CHROs now having IT under their belts. Like we know that, you know, Mercer combined their teams. You know, how do you see that kind of career framework or career trajectory for the typical HR person evolving over the next couple of years here?

Laura Maffucci:

I think that like anything, pendulums swing and I think we're seeing some organizations go a little too far with it perhaps. But I do think that there's so much, this is such a different situation with AI because there is so much change management around it and there is so much fear around it and it is impacting every single organization, that this is a time when HR is at the forefront of something that's more technology-based, that's coming through an organization and being on top of that change management and helping employees with the fear and how is it impacting the humans and how are the jobs being designed? So I definitely think that this is an opportunity for HR to shine and really show the value that it can add for those things. I think what I love about Even though I'm not sure I agree with combining IT and HR, what I love about it, the conversation about it, is it's expanding the idea of what employee experience looks like and that it's not just HR's responsibility. Culture isn't created by HR. Culture is created by leadership and all of the other functions. Every function tends to have its own little internal culture. So it just shows how important it is for everyone, not just HR, not just IT, to be thinking about that employee experience.

Shari Simpson:

Laura, what a great way to end our conversation. I feel actually more exhilarated about the use of AI and how we can really leverage this rapid change around us. So thanks for sitting down and chatting with me.

Laura Maffucci:

Thank you. It was fun. Enjoyed chatting with you.

Shari Simpson:

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.