

HR Mixtape: Episode with Dr. Alexander Alonso, Chief Data and Analytics Officer at the Society for Human Resource Management, hosted by Shari Simpson

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.

Shari Simpson:

Joining me today is Dr. Alexander Alonso, Chief Data and Analytics Officer for the Society for Human Resource Management. Dr. Alonso is a recognized thought leader in HR analytics, workforce readiness, and competency modeling, helping shape strategic direction and policy in the HR industry. Alex, thank you so much for sitting down and chatting with me here at SHRM 2025 in San Diego.

Dr. Alexander Alonso:

I appreciate the opportunity, Shari. It's wonderful to see you.

Shari Simpson:

Yeah, I am fascinated by the place that you get to sit in the HR world around data science and analytics and just all the amazing ways that you can see what our profession is doing and the impact it's going to have. So I wanted to center our conversation around kind of two topics today. One is around HR competency models and the other is really that data science, data analytics space. And the competency framework for me is really exciting. I'm working on my doctorate and part of it is exploring generational approaches to learning using adaptive learning tools and the impact of HR competency

models. I know this is like a big question to start with, but what do you think are some of the competencies that are maybe becoming obsolete for HR and some that we definitely need to lean into?

Dr. Alexander Alonso:

So it's fascinating. I'm going to preface my response by saying that some are actually really becoming obsolete, right? but some are evolving in ways that we've not really ever considered before. Right. And when I say that, one of the things that strikes me is, and it's funny because my, my role at SHRM was to build the first ever HR competency model. When I first joined SHRM and I was an individual contributor 15 years ago, and since then launched certification, did the BAC, the BASC, all the different versions of it. And, One of the things that stands out is over that time, we've seen a shift in three key areas, right? The first was really in what change management looked like and transformation looked like. Case in point, if you were to look at transformation 15 years ago, 10 years ago, we called it change management and it was all about people. It was 100% about people. Today, organizations are transforming themselves and doing so for strategic reasons, and they're starting with the tech. So it's the tech, but then the big issue is how do I make sure that the system is human-centered and people-centered. And then beyond that also enables this notion of AI agency and human agency, right? And so that's something that is just an example of how we're seeing these things evolve over time. I have a dear friend, her name is Kristen Sabo, Captain Kristen Sabo, former U.S. Air Force. And she's a Google and she's a director of social listening and employee listening, right? And she specializes specifically in trying to understand how it is that their workforce is transforming and how the technology that they're introducing into the world, not just in their own workplace, is transforming things that happen at Google with their workforce, how they feel, the sentiment, those types of things. She is a person whose entire workforce is 100% AI agents. 100% AI agents. And yet she is the most savvy person I know in terms of transformation. And I mean, in a fascinating way, she's actually an embodiment of what it would have been like 15 years ago back in the military where she would have dealt with a command climate survey and it would have been a survey and that's all she would have done and that's the only data she would have brought to bear.

Today she's a data analyst and her entire workforce is just a series of AI agents making it so that she understands better what people are experiencing. That's an evolution that I could never have pictured in the world of HR. The other thing that I think we're seeing, right, and we took, you know, obviously there's some backlash around what we've done over the years around global cultural effectiveness, mindsets that were inclusive, variety of different things, right? And if you're here at SHRM25, or even if you are on LinkedIn Live, you saw Johnny C. Taylor Jr., our CEO, my boss, and my friend, I gotta be clear. One of the things he talked about is we're seeing what it means to be an inclusive workplace change, and having that inclusive mindset change. not just because of regulatory and policy differences, but in reality, because there is a variety of different ways that it can be achieved today, right? Ensuring inclusion today is much more of a marketing job. Right. And that blend of HR experience, employee experience and consumer experience and, and much more focused on those things. You would never have talked about that 10, 15 years ago. Right. So those are the things that are sort of just like completely evolving and being different. Now, people always ask me what has actually dropped off. Right. What has dropped off, if anything, I'll tell you what things that have dropped off. are the notions of leadership traits to some degree. Some of the things that are dropping off are facets of business acumen. Business acumen is to me somewhat of an anathema. It's an ugly term because it's a way of saying You are in business, but you have to be specialized and really understand business, right? Understand and build acumen towards it, right? In reality, what I think about that is we're seeing an evolution in this profession to the point where we are the strategic drivers of what is the transformation within an organization, right? And because of that, because of that, I'm tired of hearing about business acumen, to be perfectly honest. We are the business, right? That to me is something that is evolving and kind of falling by the wayside a bit.

Shari Simpson:

How do you think that's going to influence the next evolution of SHRM's model?

Dr. Alexander Alonso:

I would argue, so the funny thing is my vision for what we do with the certification team and how they build this research and do this. When we first started this, we were updating every five years, right? And today we're at the point where we're almost updating every 18 months because the profession is shifting that much. What I think that we're going to see in that next evolution is really more around how well you create three kind of key facets that are driving value in organizations. Can you make great leaders, right? Can you create a place where you're optimizing the value generated by your talent? And can you take the best talent available to you based upon their skills and quantify that so that you can optimize that talent? It's really the intersection of, do I have a great culture and is it optimized for me to get the best value out of my talent? And that talent can be any type of talent. It could be AI and HI. It can be human intelligence only, or it can be AI intelligence only. But the problem is it's evolving this profession to the point where we're going to start to see CHRO jobs change and become CHIRO jobs, right? Chief Human Artificial Intelligence Resource Officers. And you're going to see these things happen. In fact, we're getting the first signals of that. Moderna did, ServiceNow did this. We've seen a variety of places where this is happening. And when you talk to CEOs, one of the things that we hear repeatedly is people who are in HR understand difficult situations, managing people and getting people to change. People who are in tech don't really do that, right? So whether we like it or not, this is going to be HR's baby moving forward. We're going to be Kairos. We're going to see that happen more than everybody becoming a CTO. That to me is a big deal.

Shari Simpson:

Yeah, it was really fascinating when I read the article about what Moderna did in merging those teams together. And it was one of those moments in my own, you know, HR profession career that I was like, that's innovative. That's creative. That's actually being strategic and forward thinking about what your organization needs and changing the landscape. So it's exciting to be kind of on the outside of it, watching how that's going to play out so publicly.

Dr. Alexander Alonso:

I mean, the last thing that I think we saw happen like that, the last innovation that we saw happen like that was when we introduced the internet and you had to have a cyber person on your staff, a cybersecurity officer of some sort, right? A CISO.

Shari Simpson:

Okay, this next question might be controversial, so if you don't want to answer it, it's fine, just let me know. I'm curious what your perspective is as somebody who has lived and breathed and helped create these competency models for HR. Our profession in general hasn't agreed together on one model to rule them all, like, you know, you're a certified public accountant or you're a paramedic, right, as a licensing body. Do you think there's an opportunity for the profession to coalesce around one model?

Dr. Alexander Alonso:

It's fascinating. People have asked me this in the past, and Lord knows, having been at the beginning of it all, right, like I was that guy, it's certainly a question I've dealt with quite a bit, right? I think what you find when you look at all the models is there's a lot of overlap in many cases, right? But what I lean towards is the one that's most forward leaning, right? Because the one that's going to advance the profession is the one that's going to change the profession. And when you look at that, I mean, not to, you know, obviously I'm biased, I drink my own Kool-Aid and all that, right? But one of the things that stands out is you see that there's this forward-leaning kind of perspective when it comes to thinking about how AI is changing the world of work and changing the data behind it to make sure that it's adapting to what realities in the workplace are. Not waiting every five years, not doing these things, right? That to me speaks to it. Do I believe the HR profession will ever have a day where we're all under one umbrella? I hope so. And that's from the guy who helped build the biggest one in the world. That speaks to the importance of actually having that model be in your, in your DNA, right? As a, as a professional. And that, you know, there are many great things about all the other models, but this is an example of how much that means to employers. If you were to think about that, that to me speaks to the notion, let's get, let's all

get under one tent, agree, and just back one, right? I mean, that, that to me is a real thing.

Shari Simpson:

Yeah. And I can tell you from my own personal experience, I have two master's degrees, an MBA, one in HR, and it wasn't really until I got my SHRM SCP that I saw an uptake and return of my applications for jobs, you know? So, so yeah, you're right. It's, it's definitely something that the employer community is looking for. If you're an HR leader and you want to assess the competency of your team, let's say not everybody has gone down the journey, right, to get certified, but you know that you want to help your team grow and identify potential gaps. What are some ways that you would suggest HR leaders start to tackle that?

Dr. Alexander Alonso:

You know, I always argue that a self-assessment of your own kind of skills and what you know and don't know, more importantly, is valuable. And I argue that you should do that annually. I am a big believer that we as humans just love to validate what we know. And, you know, maybe it's my psychological training, but part of what I think we should really focus on is how we are testing ourselves to learn. I use an example of this. I actually am a big believer that you should do a course with one of your coworkers. at any point in time. It should not be just you. It should be you and your coworker, somebody who you trust, who you feel vulnerable with, and you can do what you need to do, and go and take a course that is something way outside your wheelhouse, right? For me, believe it or not, it was just this last year, I partnered with one of my best colleagues, the Vice President of Business Intelligence at Trim, and one of the things that we did was we took a course in something we didn't know anything about. So we both took a course at MIT virtual, right, all e-learning, getting our certificates in data monetization, right? And sure, data, it seems like we all know this, but monetization is a very different model, right? And I'm the first to say it, she completely kicked my butt in the grading of this course, right? She was top prize marks, all those things, I was just happy to finish. But what was great about it is we both learned from that collaborative experience. Most HR leaders don't get the

time to do that. If you look at what HR leaders are most guilty of, is we're very good at making sure other people are learning. And when it comes to our profession, the cobbler's kids have no shoes. We don't do it. We refuse to do it in many cases, right? Or we do it, but we do it in an old way. And so the other two things I'd argue is we really should take advantage of, there's a variety of apps out there. that are now the TikTok of learning, right? They've democratized learning to the point where there are some, we partner with a group called Bytes, B-Y-T-E-S, that looks at, and full disclosure, we've invested in them, they actually do basically customized AI-based learning that exists completely on whatever content your organization wants you to have. So imagine learning about employee policies in two minutes and swipe. You know, it's fascinating. There's things like that, right? That just make it so much more accessible. The other thing I'd argue is, and this is just something that I always invite other leaders to do and really HR leaders, because we're very bad at this. HR leaders in particular are very bad at this. No offense to anybody, but we don't actually ever go get 360 degree feedback or even peer feedback, right? tell me what I'm not doing, tell me how I'm not working well, tell me what it is that I fall down on, right? And as a competency, that to me is something that would be absolutely valuable. Every competency model on the planet in history has had communication in it, right? Some form of communication in it. Every single one has listening in it as well. But nobody does listening to learn and nobody does listening to change how I practice, right? Those are very different things. Those are not the same thing as active listening, which we've all heard about, or, you know, taking feedback, all those wonderful words, right? I mean, when I hear leaders actually think about what they do for communication, I want them to listen, to learn, right? Don't judge, don't respond to all that nonsense that we all do very well and listen to change your behavior. If you know that the point of the listening is to help you change your behavior upfront, it changes the way you go about it.

Shari Simpson:

I suspect too that part of the reason that HR doesn't do that is there's this still, unfortunately, this ingrained fear of, if I say that there's something that I might not be doing well, that's going to reflect poorly on me. Even though we teach our managers, we teach our leadership team that that 360 feedback is so important. It's fascinating that we can't kind of embrace that ourselves.

Dr. Alexander Alonso:

It is fascinating. To me, it's funny, the best moment I've ever had at SHRM as a leader, right? I've been a leader at SHRM now going on 11 years, and I was an individual contributor for the first, actually, I take that back, 13 years, and I've been an individual contributor for, or I started off as an individual contributor for the first two. The best moment, everybody wants me to share what my favorite moment was at SHRM, best moment I ever had at SHRM. My best moment at SHRM was a day that I completely screwed everything up. I completely screwed everything up. I misreported information to chapters, right? And it was not intentional by any stretch, but I forgot that the chapters had not heard this information before. I didn't couch it the right way. It had to do with the launch of certification. Some of it, not the original launch, but some new facets that we were engaged in. And one of the things I'll never forget is I got reamed. I mean, not by my boss, let me be clear, not by my boss, but by my, my, my fellow chapter leaders, my, the people who I serve. Right. And they were right. They were right. But what was most powerful about that for me was not only did it really feel like a gut punch, because it was me being unwilling to accept something, the best part about it was I was supposed to go have lunch with one of my teams, the Sherm Knowledge Center, right? Back in the day, I used to lead that group. And I'll never forget, one of the leaders, I basically wrote them and I said, hey, guys, I really screwed something up and I need a good 30 minutes to get over it. I'll be honest, I'm shaken by it, right? And the best thing about that was every single one of them to a person after that, the next day or two, they said, I appreciate you being vulnerable enough to tell us you screwed something up. And that you, even in your role, experience those things, right? And let me tell you about how you're doing things really well. That to me was a completely different experience. To this day, still one of my favorite moments at TRIM.

Shari Simpson:

When you fail and you own it, there's such power in that. There's such power in that. All right. I want to switch gears for a little bit and talk about your other hat that you wear, your main hat, right? There's a data science, data analytics role. You know, when I think about all of the data that HR has access to. Sometimes we're not utilizing it the best to influence our talent strategies, you know, help the business make money. What ways can HR analytics really start to drive and influence strategy for the workforce?

Dr. Alexander Alonso:

That's a tough question. I mean, it's one that many researchers over the years have tried to answer. I think about Mark Hustled as an example. 20 years ago, it was focused on the value chain and how you create the HR value chain, right? In my estimation, the best way to really tackle this if you're an HR leader wanting to drive strategy is you need to stop doing two things. Don't use data to generate insights, have insights and use the data to either confirm or invalidate what you think, right? Because much of what happens is data is only as good as the analysis that someone puts into it, right? And we get a lot of reporting done. There's a lot of analytics out there, but nobody's actually looking at it and trying to understand the depth of what it means, right? Like, what does it actually mean? Is it a leading indicator? Is it something that's actually more symptom of a deeper issue? Is it something that is actually just an anomaly? Those types of things, right? Don't confirm your hypotheses, but by the same token, don't go out there and assume that your insights are the only insights that are going to be out there, right? Use the data the right way. And then don't use it just to be the smartest person in the room. Use it to drive action, right? Tie your insight to some form of action, right? Those things get lost in many ways. And I'll give an example. I was fortunate enough to be on a panel with Angela Hanning of Fox Restaurants Concepts, right? And one of the things she talks about is she talks about In our business, it's a very data-driven business, right? Restaurants in general, you've got the point of sale systems, you've got all the revenue that you should have per person, all those things, and you determine who's going to be a great leader based upon how well they are as an individual contributor, right? But she talks about specifically There's no value in me just giving you what revenue per FTE is at a

specific restaurant, right? That is something that is a great bottom line type question, but the value in what she gleans is actually how much she knows from those managers about each of the people that work for them. How much are those people able to influence the contribution of one team member to that bottom line, right? And that analysis is deeper than just, let me run some numbers, right? That analysis provides color to what it is that is actually available there. They've used it to create leadership initiatives. They found ways to create leadership initiatives that made it so that somebody who was not on ever a leadership track, was never eligible, they found an entire class of new leaders for their restaurant, changing their entire business model. They have people now who are the person that is really a general manager, but the general manager who focuses on people issues only, right? Knowing how to pull the levers, not just in shift management, not just in, is this person compliant? Is this person showing up? But using the people to understand who's better based upon what we know about these customers, who's going to drive greater value out of that interaction. She's crafting employee experience to lead to better consumer experience, right? That is a very different model than you think of when you think of HR.

Shari Simpson:

You know, it's interesting. I was talking to somebody and I forget who it was, so my bad that I can't mention them, but we were talking about that concept of performance reviews and peer feedback and how we identify our hypos in our organization. And the concept that they were talking about was that, you know, traditional ways of performance reviews is, you know, you have your top down and your self review. You don't typically do a ton of pure stuff, you know? And it really came to light for me when I was thinking about my sons in the military. And they do this exercise where they rate the top five in the class and the top bottom of the class. And it's very public and it's very, it could ruin their career, let's be honest. But what I found interesting about bringing that concept into the workplace is there are people in your organization who are go-to's for other peers. And it might not be their role, right? It might be just somebody who has great tenure. It might be somebody who's a great collaborator. It might like not related to their role, but you, you don't have anything in your process to identify those people. So they might not even be

on your radar, even though they're a good performer, you might not identify them. So. That's kind of a long explanation for this question is when you think about using people data in an ethical way related to performance, what are the things we need to think about or potentially the trends that you're seeing there?

Dr. Alexander Alonso:

So it's fascinating. A lot of people don't realize this, but this is an area where I think AI is ripe. to really help us be much more effective. Everybody has a hard time having a hard conversation. Managers don't actually know 90% of what their people do. And when it comes to HR, we are not exactly great at helping them figure out what is the best way to do this in a great way. We have this sort of structured answers and what have you. But one of the things that strikes me is This is where AI can make us a lot better, right? Imagine a world where AI can help a manager identify everything that a person has accomplished in a year, right? Or not even in a year, let's say in a week. And then the AI helps you kind of determine what the best way to approach this person's kind of motivation tactics really are, right? And then from there, imagine a world where you can actually get a score sheet that says, after having had the conversation, right? Now I know what points I hit well and what points I didn't hit hard enough, what I need to kind of follow up on with this individual. But more importantly, it'll score how well this individual actually understood and is aligned with what feedback I was giving them, right? That's an area where those are three different use cases. Those are three different pieces of AI, but all of it is going to be valuable in helping us be much more effective about these difficult conversations, as they say, right? Now, what's fascinating to me, though, is there is a whole world of ways in which you can identify some of those people, that preamble that you had for this question, those people who are influencers, that are drivers, that actually are top performers. Believe it or not, there is now a whole suite of tools that allow us to do that. It's called organizational network analysis. And whenever you find this, right, imagine like a map of a neural network, right? Whenever you find a node where there's a lot of activity, that's someone who people go to, because they're a respected influencer or expert within the organization on something, right? They tend to be either a high performer or they tend to be

somebody who gets how, pardon my French, but how shit gets done in the organization, right? And that's actually really valuable. So what you know now is you don't need to necessarily go by performance or use because those are fraught with all kinds of bias, any number of factors, right? But the other thing you can do is also kind of really take advantage of those unseen nodes and say, look at this. I now have people who I would never have thought of, right? And there are organizations around the world using this now. Rutgers was the place where a lot of this was invented. There are organizations around the world now who are using this to basically say, okay, you are a senior person who is really good at this and helps educate these people. We're going to take you out of that charge nurse role and we're going to bring you over here and you're going to be management. And this is what you're going to do. You're going to help educate doctors now and you're going to completely change the dynamic. Right. And that is unbelievable.

Shari Simpson:

Well, and that taps into the concept around skills. You know, it's funny, as you were talking, I was thinking about, you know, my own performance review as you do your self-assessments. And I'm like, man, I would love an AI tool that could read all my emails for the year and all my team's messages and tell me like, here's all the things you accomplished. And also that's super scary. Maybe I don't want it to have all the information, but like, we're going to have to figure that out as a society, because that is a really valuable tool. And it's scary to know that somebody's going to be reading all that stuff.

Shari Simpson:

As we wrap up our conversation, what is maybe one takeaway for the HR profession that they can do right now to level up in the data analytics space?

Dr. Alexander Alonso:

One thing that I would advise every single person to do in the HR, you know, data analytics perspective, right? First and foremost, what I would actually do is basically familiarize yourself with a framework of different data analytics tools that are out there and do it with the aim of identifying four key purposes for your organization. If you're good at HR, right, you're doing one of the four

R's. You're either doing basic reliability work, being really compliant. You're doing something that is about restructuring and rethinking what you should be doing. You are re-imagining your entire organization and you're reinventing the organization, right? I'm a big believer in taxonomies and numbers of three and four and what have you. But if you're doing any one of those things, being resourceful, being, you know, re-imaginative, thinking about how you reinvent things, you know that there is a complete set of analytics that you need to tie to those activities, right? There's a whole framework out there. There's a great book out there. I recommend taking advantage of that and starting there, understanding what analytics I need to capture and how I might use it, which one of those four purposes I would use it for.

Shari Simpson:

Alex, that's good advice. And thank you for sitting down with me and just taking a few minutes to chat about competencies and data analytics.

Dr. Alexander Alonso:

Thank you, Shari. I really appreciate the opportunity.