



Vibe Teaming: How HR Turns AI Experiments Into Real Adoption

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[00:00:00] **ANNOUNCER:** You're listening to The HR Mixtape, a podcast for leaders who want to understand people, strengthen culture, and navigate change with clarity. Today's conversation starts now.

[00:00:16] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** Joining me today is Nichol Bradford, AI and Human Intelligence Executive in Residence at the Society for Human Resource Management. She is a futurist, investor, and executive with more than twenty years in technology and human potential who shapes how HR professionals worldwide approach AI adoption and workforce wellbeing. Nichol, thank you for jumping on the podcast with me today.

[00:00:48] **NICHOL BRADFORD:** Oh, it's my pleasure. It's so nice to see you again.

[00:00:51] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** We were just talking before we jumped on that we got to have one of your inaugural interview conversations around AI back when SHRM first launched their AI+HI conference, and it was wonderful. And one of the things that I was thinking about while we were chatting about that is what a difference two and a half years makes.

[00:01:13] **NICHOL BRADFORD:** Oh my goodness, yes. AI's changed, organizations have changed the way people think about it. We have had more experience with AI now, and so it's just sort of like thinking about where people were then and what we talked about then and then where we are now. It's pretty dramatic.

[00:01:31] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** Yeah. It's one of the things in our industry that is moving so fast, and you've talked about before HR leaders really becoming that AI catalyst in their organization. Can you help define for me, though, what does that mean practically? Because I think a lot of HR leaders fundamentally understand that, but are not really sure what they should be doing.

[00:01:52] **NICHOL BRADFORD:** So an AI HR catalyst is a person who's helping their organization really move from where we are now, which is people have been doing a lot of experimentation, and how do we move from there into actual responsible adoption. And so that's the transition. Now, when you and I talked about this a few years ago, it was just getting people fluent, but now it's really about taking these experiments, these pilots, and then actually turning it into adoption.

[00:02:24] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** Do you think that there's still a group in HR that doesn't necessarily understand AI in general and doesn't know what to do with it? I think we're getting a lot of expectations from our business leaders, introduce AI, put AI in everything, and that isn't always the best solution, right? So how does HR figure out what the most important piece is that they need to think about when it comes to AI?

[00:02:49] **NICHOL BRADFORD:** Well, so you asked two questions. The first question is about where are people sort of at, and there's a range. Even though it feels like it's all we've been talking about for the last couple of years, it still is at the beginning. So for anyone out there listening, if you feel like you're behind, you're not. We're just at the very beginning of this transformation. And so what we see, especially across our SHRM membership, is there's a wide range. There's people who are just beginning, and then there are people who are really advanced in building agents and a bunch of other things. But the people who are just getting started, you're not late, but it is time to get started.

[00:03:30] **NICHOL BRADFORD:** Secondarily, the question about what is the most important thing to focus on. I would say that it's very individual, because what we've seen is that the return on investment is a combination of context, so what's going on in your organization, culture, and customer, and those can be internal customers.

[00:03:53] **NICHOL BRADFORD:** So a big part of it is, what's the thing that is bothering you and your team the most? What is the thing that's sort of like the biggest challenge? And it doesn't mean it's the



most sophisticated challenge, but it's sort of like, what is the rock in your shoe? What is the thing that if this were solved, your organization and your team would work much better? That's the place to start. And just do one thing, and do that one thing, and learn from that. And then pick the next thing together, and then do that thing and learn from that. It's far better to do step by step problem-solving that solves real problems for the organization than to do, especially if you're just getting started, a sweeping, abstract transformation, that then day to day people are like, "Okay, how is this making my life better?"

[00:04:47] **NICHOL BRADFORD:** And then also the other thing I would say is, once you do a few of those where it's a real problem for regular people in your organization and it gets better, then that inspires people to find other places to change the work, and then you have momentum. And those early things can actually help you get the kind of buy-in that allows you to have a real transformation.

[00:05:12] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** And we do this already in our HR careers with all the other programs we manage. We do test pilots. This isn't any different. It might feel different, and I like that you mentioned you're not behind. I don't know where I read this statistic, so shame on me that I can't quote the actual source. But it talked about the use of AI, and only about 20% of the population of the world is actually using AI. So we've got time. We can't ignore it, but we've got time, so I appreciate you saying that. One of the biggest things that SHRM has talked about, and you've also talked about, is that human potential alongside the AI capabilities. How do you make sure that AI is adding rather than replacing that human potential?

[00:05:57] **NICHOL BRADFORD:** A great deal of it is what are the things that when humans are augmented will allow us to really support and change and drive our businesses. And so a part of it is, have you seen or heard of email exchanges where everyone's AI, whether they're on Copilot or whatever they're on, they're just talking to each other? You can see sort of all of these automated exchanges, and it doesn't actually accomplish the goal. And so there's a bit of that working its way out of the system. But one of the things that you'll see is that I think people really want to solve problems together. One of the things that I'm really excited about is I've been looking a lot at what does it look like when teams use AI together?

[00:07:00] **NICHOL BRADFORD:** And that, I think, is the most interesting sort of what's next. So we spent the last two, two-ish years really thinking, and we're learning a lot about how individuals can be more productive with AI. So that's where you've heard about different forms of prompting or, whenever I'm starting something complex, I actually use dictation, and I just talk about what kind of problem I'm trying to solve, et cetera.

[00:07:29] **NICHOL BRADFORD:** Then my very last sentence is, "And write a prompt for that." I might say, "Write a McKinsey-style prompt for that. Write a Fast Company-type prompt for that." Sort of like whatever's the feel I want, and then I have it write the prompt and, depending on what I'm doing, I'll use different models.

[00:07:47] **NICHOL BRADFORD:** And so we've learned a lot about what does it take for an individual to be productive. I think what's really interesting is what does it take for a team to be productive and understanding that, and there's some really wonderful things. There's a methodology called Vibe Teaming. It was developed by Jacob Taylor out of the Brookings Institution, and it's really straightforward, and I raise it because it's really a good example of augmentation.

[00:08:15] **NICHOL BRADFORD:** And what you do is you have a structured conversation with a group of people, so say five or six people, and you have one person who's the AI wrangler, you have another person who agrees for this conversation to be the facilitator, meaning maybe you're using a structure sort of like, what's the problem? What are the constraints? What are the must-haves? And so it's like a structured conversation, and then that facilitator is ensuring that everyone's communicating, that everyone's putting their thoughts in. And you record that in a transcript, then you take that transcript, and you put it into ChatGPT or one of the other models or your corporate model, and you say, "Organize this," according to this structure.

[00:09:06] **NICHOL BRADFORD:** And then the group, this is the key part, you take the output and you put it on screen, and the group talks about the output. What's right? What's wrong? Is that accurate? And you record that, and then you add that back in. And so the ability for a group to do very high-level strategic thought, and the thing that's really incredible about it is that in this context, a lot of times when



we're working with AI one-on-one, if you're not really careful, and because it's been trained on sort of like the corpus of human knowledge, it adds a lot to what you're doing.

[00:09:45] **NICHOL BRADFORD:** But in this other structure, AI is not adding. It's simply organizing and helping us access the collective intelligence on a team of human beings who know the problem, they know the culture, they know the context, they know the customer. And those conversations and those outputs, in many times, it's superior output.

[00:10:08] **NICHOL BRADFORD:** The other thing that it does that's really exciting is there's a lot of organizations where individuals are using AI so much individually, it's getting really lonely. So people have a lot of interaction with the models, but they kinda feel alone at work. And then I do my 70-page proposal, and I send it to you, and you put it in your AI to summarize it. And then you send me your 70-page counter-proposal. And so it's very lonely. But what this vibe teaming does is people actually feel really connected. It gives a regular point of connection. They're thinking together, which is the fun part of working together. That's why we work together, because it's fun, and it gives a structured output that is superior.

[00:11:02] **NICHOL BRADFORD:** So it creates social moments, it creates ritual, it creates superior output, allows people to do collective intelligence. It makes the models augmentative. I just made that word up. But it supports the humans. It's not a participant. It's not a thinker on the thing.

[00:11:22] **NICHOL BRADFORD:** It's taking the brilliance of a group of people and helping them pull it out. And then the last part that's really important is that over 44% of people say that they use AI every day in some of the studies that we've done. But an almost equal number of people say that they encounter work slop in a given day, and that's the thing where I don't even have to describe it. If you've seen a huge report where you're reading and you're like, "What did I just read?" And you don't know what was in there, that's work slop. So having these vibe teaming sessions, maybe once every two weeks or so, what it does is it helps the whole team understand what's salient, what's important. And so it actually reduces the work slop because then people are really clear about what's additive to the team and what the team is looking for and what the goals are. So I think that is one of the newest ways to ensure that AI is supporting human potential.

[00:12:25] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** I love this example, especially because you can do it in person, hybrid, or fully remote, because you're basing it on that transcript that you talked about. I love that. Thank you so much for sharing that. Hopefully people will start to implement the vibe teaming in their organizations.

[00:12:42] **NICHOL BRADFORD:** Can I give you one quick example?

[00:12:43] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** Yeah.

[00:12:44] **NICHOL BRADFORD:** So I did it remote with a group of executive assistants, and it was for Assistant Day. It was a group of executive assistants, like eight of them, and they were in the room together, and I was on Zoom. And so these are not AI native folks. I mean, assistants rule the world. It's one of the things I learned very early in my career. They know everything. But they weren't who you might think of when you think about an AI native group of people. And so we did the process, and they came up with a way to fundamentally improve the efficiency of how their C-suite works together.

[00:13:32] **NICHOL BRADFORD:** And by the end of it, they realized that not only did they have a proposal for what they would do that they could take to their leaders and say, "This is how we're gonna organize these meetings," and some other things. But they also had something that they could just start doing without asking permission, and a way to fundamentally make a big difference in something that was a rock in the shoe for lots of people.

[00:13:57] **NICHOL BRADFORD:** And so it's not a giant AI overhaul. It's a rock in the shoe that was affecting the efficiency of a team, and they, non-AI natives, used vibe teaming to outline a solution that fits their culture, context, and customers. They were like, "Yeah, this will work. We're gonna try it." And it was something that if they took it to their leaders, they would've been impressed, but they also didn't even have to ask permission to do it. It was just between them, and vibe teaming helped them see it, and so I think it's wonderful.



[00:14:37] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** So for the HR leader listening who's like, "Yep, I'm totally on board. I see the value of AI. I see the value of making sure that we anchor it in human potential. What I don't understand is what guardrails I need to create," because we're starting to hear, or not starting, continuing to hear chatter around talent acquisition, hiring specifically, and performance management. So just in those two areas, where should we consider what guardrails we need to have in place so we can use these amazing tools, but we're not taking the humanity out of it?

[00:15:09] **NICHOL BRADFORD:** I have a sort of like a rule of three C's, and for these three C's that I'm gonna give, if these are involved, don't use AI for it.

[00:15:21] **NICHOL BRADFORD:** And so one is crisis. If there's a crisis, don't use AI to communicate about the crisis. If an employee is having a crisis in their life, go and speak to them, talk to them, have a conversation with them. If someone is dealing with illness or an early retirement or just all sorts of issues. If it's a crisis to anyone involved, be human about it. Do not use AI for it. Do not let your email agent craft a response. Like, no. Two, if it's a commitment in the sense that a lot of the tools that are out there can really help us match people to roles and things like that, but when you're making a commitment to someone, so a hiring commitment, or a job change within the organization, also be very human about it.

[00:16:28] **NICHOL BRADFORD:** So be human about commitments, and then be human about conflict. So if someone is getting a PIP, do not send an AI-generated email for a PIP. Or if there's a conflict between two employees, on any level, do not use AI for it. So the three Cs, crisis, commitment, or conflict, do not use AI. And for the rest of it, there's different ways to do it and responsible AI guardrails, et cetera.

[00:17:03] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** I love that. And your employees will know, because your email will have a bunch of em dashes in them.

[00:17:10] **NICHOL BRADFORD:** Yeah. Well, also, people are starting to get attuned to what it looks like because it's a very flat voice. It's very, very, very flat. And so certainly I think people won't be able to tell if anything that they see is generated or any text necessarily is generated, but what they will be able to tell, whether AI was used or not, is whether or not a real human being was on the other side. Like, is your soul in that or not? Is your essence in that? Is your humanity in that or not? People will be able to tell that.

[00:17:52] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** Yeah. Well, Nichol, this was a great conversation. Thanks for chatting with me.

[00:17:56] **NICHOL BRADFORD:** Thanks for having me.

[00:18:04] **ANNOUNCER:** Thanks for tuning in to The HR Mixtape. Like, share, review, and subscribe to support the show and help more people discover these conversations. Until next time, keep the conversation going.