

- Hey, and welcome to PCTY Talks. I'm your host Shari Simpson. During our time together we'll stay close to the news and info you need to succeed as an HR pro. And together, we'll explore topics around HR thought leadership, compliance and real life HR situations we face every day. Joining me today on the podcast is John Ingham. He is the director of the John Ingham Strategic HR Academy, analyst, trainer and consultant on people and digital transformation in the new future of work. Author of the Social Organization and creator of the Melded Network HR Model. So, John, thank you so much for taking the time to jump on the podcast with me today.

- Well, Shari, it's absolutely wonderful to be with you. Thanks so much.

- Of course, so my experience has been that while HR has a seat at the table, now, they aren't always seen as strategic partners, and you do a lot of work in the strategic HR space. So what are some of the first steps HR professionals need to take to be a strategic partner to their business?

- It's not that easy a question to answer because by the nature of being strategic, it is sort of understanding what's going on. If you were to ask, how do you get good at performance management? And there's sort of 10 things you need to know. Being strategic is a little bit harder, I think. But it is understanding the business, absolutely, because when we're talking about out strategic HR rather than business strategy. It's understanding people and organization as well. And it's a big complex area to understand. And then having clarity about the different HR processes that can do different things in the organizations in order to provide strategic success. The other thing which I think is really critical and to me, isn't so relevant in terms of the first steps HR professionals need to take. But certainly one of the key reasons that I think, that HR often still struggles with this, is the ambition to make a difference as well. So, in my experience and I've worked previously around business strategy. And for me whenever you talk around being strategic, it should be, about contributing to the strategic success the competitive advantage of a business. And I think we often define strategic HR as just sort of supporting a little bit better. I think it needs to be different to that. So the key thing, on top of the sort of knowledge and tools and so on, is just the ambition to make a difference, to really drive our through what we do with people and through HR.

- Why do you think that HR professionals get stuck in the tactical side of HR?

- Well, so having been an HR director myself, I understand that none of this is easy and I was very fortunate that my first HR role was a strategic HR role and sort of learned a lot of this doing that. I then had a operational, I found it really, really difficult to drive the

strategic things I wanted to do just because the operational activities took over. And I think that is a big part of all of this. I think the lack of understanding or the misunderstanding that I talked about before, there's a lot published and talked about around strategic HR, suggesting that, we need to understand what the business is doing, get close to the business, and so on, sort of align HR with that, and support the business to do what the business needs to do. And that's not strategic HR because we're still... I mean, I think if I said, it's fundamentally about supporting the business. And if all we're doing is supporting the business then we are still a support function. So, it's breaking through that misunderstanding and having the clarity about what we want to taking the business by the scruff of its neck almost, and having an ambition and an agenda, knowing what we want to do. I mean, there's still everything that we need to do around managing and influencing stakeholders, but even if you are doing that well, if you don't have the ambition, if you don't have the agenda that you want to drive your organization forward on then we've got no chance. So, that's the key thing. And that, because it's difficult and because of the pressures of operational HR, all of that is why we sort of get pulled back into the tactical side, I think.

- I really like the point you make about having an agenda from an HR perspective on how to move the business forward. I've read several articles where, there's these really cool innovative things that companies are doing, and I get so jazzed up when I see that, the idea or the push came from something that HR saw, and really influenced for the business to do. That being said as HR professionals need to start upskilling themselves, in what I would call business speak, meaning we're really good at knowing all of the HR terms, but often lack the initiative or the understanding for example, like around financial terms that connect to the success of our businesses. How do you go about learning that as an HR person? What's your advice to, really start to think differently and learn the terms that you CEOs and CEOs are using so you can come to the table with the same language?

- Oh gosh. So, firstly, I do agree with you. I agree with you on the need for HR to understand the business and to be able to be comfortable with financial terms, and so on. Clearly, if we can't do that, then we're not gonna be able to support the business effectively. So it's sort of table stakes for the strategic conversations which I think we need to be having. I also loved what you were saying about HR spotting an opportunity and taking it to the business. So that's to me, the key of how we make HR strategic rather than supportive. We need to understand the business and align HR to support the business. And we need to offer new opportunities to the business, that the business doesn't know about based upon our insights about people. So, we are continually lifting our own perspectives and the potential of the business by supporting those opportunities we were talking about. So all of that I agree with, and personally, and this may not be quite what you were expecting, but I think we make far

too much about the need to understand the business. I mean, we do, I'm obviously not saying that we don't, but it's not the difference that makes a difference. Being strategic in HR terms is about spotting opportunities in people and the organization, what they can do and enabling the business to perform more. So we need to understand the context of the business but the core of the strategic opportunity is people and organization. So, it's not all about HR process and it's not just about the business. It's people, understanding how we can ensure that people are gonna to be motivated to do their work, how we can help them learn effectively, how we can increase their propensity to collaborate. Really in fact, well, really, really difficult questions to answer, but the value that we provide, the extra insight that we can bring our businesses that our colleagues don't have. If all we try and do to finance, then our businesses have got no hope. We come from a different perspective and we need to leverage that perspective and ensure that we're up with the latest thinking in psychology, anthropology, sociology, cognitive neuro science, behavioral economics, and so on. That we understand what the answers are to those really difficult questions around people in our own organizations, so that we can make that strategic difference that we're talking about. And sorry, 'cause I know I've been on a bit of a rant about that, 'cause I do get excited about this. But just to finish the point, so yes, we need to be able to show the business that we are able to understand financials and speak the language of business I finance currently, or at least, that's been a situation for the last couple of the decades. But that language is changing. The language of business is becoming the language of people, fluency in understanding people's emotions and relationships and all of their needs that they bring to the business. And influencing the rest of the business to get better in that will speak as well. Yeah, so again, it's the same thing. We need to support the business. We need to mirror the business, we need to echo the business and then we need to change the business. And the change that business needs at the moment is about being me more people-centric, and we should be leading that transformation 'cause we are the people, with the skills and the insights in that area.

- I love what you had to say. And I think if you're looking for a quote to tweet from this episode, this is so good. The language of business, is becoming the language of people. I absolutely love that, it super resonates with me. As I think about how HR professionals are starting to make this change and come to the table differently, and make this move to a more strategic role. There's so many resources out there. I mean you've written books and articles around being strategic in HR, with frankly some of my favorite influencers like Dave Alrich we had him on the podcast. And then you went on to create the John Inghams Strategic HR Academy. How do you see academies like yours, changing the face of HR?

- Well, yeah, HR it's such an exciting area to work and there are so

many new insights and so much new potential and so many opportunities that, I love being involved, in helping HR move forward and take advantage of these. So, absolutely. So my writing, my consulting, my training, it's all about helping HR do that. And so look, so academies have a huge role. I have to say for myself, this is a bit of a tactical response in a sense. So I've been over the last decade or more, providing a lot of face to face training for HR practitioners, mainly in London, the nearest city to me, but, in Asia and South Africa and various other places as well. And every time I stand up to deliver a training course that I've already delivered, 20 times before. I sort of scratch my head and go, what, in today's digital age, there's gotta be a better way of doing that? But I never... It's at the innovators dilemma thing, how do you stop doing what you've been doing, so you get the time to do something differently? And I never managed to move to a digital approach until the pandemic. And then, I couldn't do face to face training anymore. So I was sort of forced into making this work. So, it's partly a tactical thing but it is strategic too, because now that I deliver training through a digital platform, firstly it means I can reach people all the way around the world. We do flipped learning. So the sessions involve courses, which pre-recorded, which people can take in their own time in a very flexible way. But then we have study groups based upon the courses where we bring people together. And we really optimize the time of people being together, by having some deep, meaningful, useful, impactful conversations around the things that people have learned in the course. So all of that, is why I think digital academies are gonna become more and more important. And particularly in terms of an HR academy, well, I really sort of, in all spheres of knowledge and professionalism, I think the amount of knowledge we have is growing to hugely, the speeds of production of that knowledge is accelerating. There's still a lot of HR people around who do maybe, one day course once a year or one say two years. And that just is nowhere near enough. We're not gonna be in a position where we can answer those difficult or complex questions that are so important to business these days, unless we're investing very seriously in our own development. So again, I'm hoping that my own academy and the other academies exist. We can all play a role in really helping HR move forward more quickly to invest in, to increase, and to accelerate the rate that we are developing our capabilities. Because our businesses need HR. They need these strategic HR capabilities, and we're not going to be performing at the level we need to, without the support that I and others try to provide.

- It's so important your note about, HR professionals doing one day a year. I can't tell you how long in my career I had done that, where it's like I went to that employment law update conference for a day, or I went for a very specific topic. But you're absolutely right, there's so much more, and I've talked about this before on the podcast. But HR professionals should be in this constant learning mode, whether it's podcasts or books or academies or online teaching

or articles, just be this sponge of knowledge, because there is so much that we need to absorb right now so that we can bring it back to our organization. You mentioned some different verticals, psychology being one of 'em. Something that I find really fascinating is this idea of neuroplasticity. And it's just one little nugget, that HR can learn about and help to influence some of the stuff that they're doing. So it absolutely resonates with me. As our last question, I'd love to ask you, what's your advice for young HR professionals who are just building their skillset, what should they be focusing on?

- Thank you. And look, thank you once again for having me on the podcast. I mean, the academy that I'm providing can play a significant role in this space, but you are absolutely right. The HR professionals should be taking advantage of all of the stuff being shared on social media and podcasts are a vital learning tool, so I completely agree with what you've been saying. What should HR professionals be doing, and well, it is what we've been talking about. Understanding the business is important. So trying to get varied experience across HR, outside of HR, and really trying to focus as much possible on the way that we know business is gonna be done in two years, five years, 10 years time rather than what is happening today. So, learning, doesn't all need to be digital. I mean, there are some wonderful books out. Gary Hamel's Humanocracy, for example, or Frederick Laloux, Reinventing Organizations on my own, the social organization. There's lots of information that can help describe the sort of path, the journey, the trajectory that we're on. So it's having a base in, what matters now, and keeping an eye on that trajectory as well, and helping the organizations we work in, sort of understand where things are going so that we don't create, all style performance management processes from two decades ago, but we are doing it in a way that's going to help us move in the direction that we've got to go. And look, I mean we've just said, how difficult this is, even for an experienced HR practitioner to stay on top of all of this new knowledge. So yeah, for a young practitioner trying to absorb all of this thinking, I mean, it's a huge ask, but the potential and the pay back of getting on board with this agenda 'cause HR is gonna be, I mean, it is, and it's gonna continue to be at the center of organization success, and young HR professionals have got an amazing career. Yeah, really interesting but really impactful as well ahead of them. So, it's worth making that investment, I think.

- Well, John, you just gave me goosebumps with your excitement. So, it's so exciting to see what's happening in HR and what the future holds for us. So I absolutely love that. I wrote down the books. We'll include those links in the show notes for anybody who wants to check out those books, as well as your academy and the work that you're doing. So, John, thanks for taking a little bit of time out of your day to chat with us.

- Oh, I so enjoyed it. Thanks much.

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