

# HR Mixtape: Episode with Shari Simpson featuring Michelle Sims, CEO of Yupro Placement

## **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 Michelle Sims, CEO of Yupro Placement. Michelle leads a mission-driven team dedicated to advancing skills-first hiring and economic mobility for overlooked talent. Her work is redefining how organizations build high-performing, inclusive workforces. Michelle, thank you so much for jumping on the podcast with me.

## **Michelle Sims:**

Thank you. I'm glad we finally got it scheduled. We're both busy folks.

## **Shari Simpson:**

It's been crazy and the weather's been insane. So I'm so glad our schedule worked out. I have been looking at the HR landscape, you know, over the last year and there's so much better content and discussions around skills-based hiring, skills-first approaches to things like job descriptions and job architecture. And you are such a champion for skills-first hiring. I'd love if maybe we could start by you sharing a little bit about, you know, how did you find that? What was your defining moment in that journey to kind of come to that view around skills-first hiring?

## **Michelle Sims:**

I love the question, and I think I have the answer now, but I didn't have the answer along the journey, right? It's easier to look back and say, oh, okay, so

this is the red thread that got me here, and I think I've become so passionate. One of my very first jobs. I sold after-school programs in marginalized school districts for school-aged kids so that they would have a safe place to go to after school, to do their homework, to have a snack. And I was so appreciative of these programs because I was a kid in my 80s and a latchkey kid, right? We all went home and seemed safe. But the difference was how it transformed families that created opportunities for parents to be at work to ensure that they could provide for their family. So I think that was really pivotal in starting my career and that supercharged me to teach community college. And so I taught in the community college system for 17 years and then similar with young adults and adults of all ages, they're working multiple jobs, they're trying to better themselves, get out of dead-end hourly jobs, and really mentoring and motivating adults to create opportunities for themselves and saw what it took to create opportunity for folks that were willing to do the work. And then I landed in staffing and the HR path, which I'm sure you're not surprised after hearing those two jobs, and skills-based hiring falls in line with creating equitable opportunity based on what folks can do and their potential and what they're willing to do versus where they've gone to school or what zip code they grew up in or their social network. Because professional and social networks are also a privilege. And so, yeah, I think, you know, long story to a short answer, my red thread has just been supporting talent to create opportunity both for themselves and in the workplace.

**Shari Simpson:**

You know, it's interesting that you started with that you can define it now, but you couldn't define it then. And as you were talking, I was thinking about, you know, my own journey in HR. My undergrad is not in HR. I did not go to school for it. I may or may not have shared my journey on the podcast. So I know there's been a couple of episodes. You know, I advocated for myself to step into an HR role and I did not have the background, degree or skills. And it's really interesting because if that person, and that one person, that one CHRO had not given me the opportunity to step into something based on my skills, I would never be in this path now. So it's so important to switch our mindset around, you know, what does talent need to move on to a certain role or to level up in a certain role? You know, why do you think so many companies are

still defaulting to those degree requirements then when we know intuitively that demonstrated skills actually have a bigger impact than necessarily what your degree says you're competent in?

**Michelle Sims:**

I think, and to your point, yes, I don't know that all of your HR listeners, probably half of them can say they sell into it, right? There isn't necessarily a degree in some of the things that we do. And so, but what's interesting is the Reagan administration actually started a very prominent marketing campaign that college was the path to prosperity in this country. And college is a business, many for profit, right? And so as every other advertisement, you get sucked into what this narrative is. But that narrative also rules out millions of Americans that don't have a college degree. And then the other thing is, when that marketing propaganda started, we also used a degree to filter out very quickly, the resume parsing, right? So before tech, we did it manual, we put them in stacks, right? If you've been around long enough, and then tech comes along, and you're building filters in technology. And the first filter is, do you have a college degree or not? And even entry-level jobs 20 years ago required, and still many do, a college degree as that first filter. And so some companies now, a lot of companies, the technology hasn't quite caught up with the workforce demands and today's really demand for more inclusive hiring practices. Like that tech is a bit behind, but the mindset is also behind. And the hiring manager's like, I need my position filled right now. And how do we do that quickly? And we just default to those traditional practices of finding talent in the same places. And if you've done the job and we're stealing from our competition, but that's running out. And skills-based hiring allows us to look beyond that. Or the companies that don't, I mean, I truly believe they will be left behind.

**Shari Simpson:**

I think so much about the military when it comes to skills-based hiring because veterans come out and there's all these resources for practitioners and talent acquisition leaders to help understand how a role in the military translates into roles in corporate America or other types of roles. But that is very specific to that population of veterans. And a lot of those tools are being

created by veteran organizations, right? It's not being created by companies. So I think it can be really hard for those hiring teams to understand that transferable skill model. How have you seen or how have you coached or maybe you know of ways that these teams are getting better at identifying those so that they can attract these nontraditional candidates?

**Michelle Sims:**

Yeah, I think this is where the lag happens, because to your point, corporations don't necessarily know how to work with workforce organizations and nonprofit organizations that are really taking on developing nontraditional talent that don't have degrees, right? Where I have seen it most successful is when an organization gets to a point where they're a bit desperate, they do have high turnover, they have demand that they can't fill, they need to grow their business, and they're struggling. And they're like, all right, they start asking the right questions. How do we find talent? Why aren't we finding talent? How do we create new pathways? And the organizations that reach out to workforce development organizations that say, okay, we want to build a model very similar to a college recruiting program, right? Most organizations have a college recruiting program. You build the same type of structure around workforce development organizations and nonprofits. Because there are literally hundreds of nonprofits across the country that are training talent in bootcamps and certifications and apprenticeship programs and organizations that are tapping into those organizations and creating recruiting programs similar to just how they would with a college recruiting team, then skills-based hiring becomes the and multiplier versus the or multiplier. Right. And that's what we spend our time doing is helping organizations build that muscle in how to tap into those non-traditional candidate pools. And there's so many great veteran nonprofit organizations that are supporting talent and they get, you know, free certifications through like CompTIA and Grow with Google and IBM Skills Build is a big one. I mean, all of these are great programs and you can get certification and college-level training to prepare you for the workforce. Truly tapping into the and and the versus the or I think is the big answer.

**Shari Simpson:**

For teams or for really the HR departments of one, I talk about them a lot. I've sat in that space before. It can be super overwhelming to wear all these hats. So I want to get kind of tactical for a second. If you want to start to think about switching your interview design so that they are better assessing for skills over credentials, what are some tactical ways or some first steps that, you know, the practitioners can do to start making that shift during the interview process?

**Michelle Sims:**

It's a good question. I think a couple of things do need to come before the interview process, right? Because you really need to pick the right jobs that you're going to really tackle skills-first methods for before you go through interviewing. So, picking some of those entry-level, non-specialized roles that really where skills-first hiring thrives, and then working with hiring managers and folks in the process and the stakeholders on what are the top five skills that are required to be successful in their role, because you need the top five skills to build questions. So, the questions also need to be reframed. So, we have to reframe to reassess, right? So, we're asking questions like, tell me about a time that you were given a task, you've never done it before, how did you research and overcome that and get it done on time versus, oh, where did you go to school and what classes did you take? Right? So reframing to reassess. And so that interview process that we're creating questions for, if we are not doing the steps before that to truly understand the skills for success, we can't create the questions. And then the other piece is creating an interview process that removes bias. And let's face it, we may have bias, we just have to work really hard to remove as much as possible. But having a diverse panel, using a rubric and scoring where everybody knows what they're asking, everybody is aligned on the same skills that they're trying to assess. Because when, you know, three people in the interview process, this person's looking for this skill, this person's looking for this skill, based on what they're needing to get results for, it's, you know, then that's where the bias comes in. So it's really building a bias-free process based on the top skills for that job to be successful. And that takes intention. Like, and that's why, you know, it's, you get the myths and the concern that it's expensive and takes too much

time, but you start small. Like we always say, pilot before scale, right? Because you also need case studies and support and measures to sell your story to scale before you can really, you know, get legs on.

**Shari Simpson:**

That's such a good example to think about when you want to roll this out too. Instead of starting necessarily with your C-suite or the highest level in your organization, find that one manager who's always been, you know, kind of the HR champion, or maybe you have a really good relationship with them. Pitch it to them first, you know. That's going to give you that ability to test out some of this stuff and really develop that internal case study to say, Hey, you know, we made this change with Jim's team for his frontline manufacturing roles, and we've been able to increase retention, decrease performance problems, right? You can come with this really rich and deep data to make your case. And I think that will help you have those conversations with your executive team about a broader switch, because you'll have that ROI of inclusive skills-first hiring in your back pocket to say like, hey, here's how I've done it and here's how we're going to do it. As you think about some of the barriers that candidates face, the obvious ones I think are our resumes and ATS systems and some of that technology filtering that you talked about, how do candidates get through that stuff, you know, or is the ownership on HR to stop asking those questions or stop putting those filters in? I kind of feel like it's, like you said, it's going to be a little bit of a time constraint to get through some of this stuff, but we got to start somewhere. I guess, what are your recommendations for both the candidate and the HR practitioner who's building these tools?

**Michelle Sims:**

Well, I think one of the barriers that, I mean, I do think it's more on the responsibility of the organization and the HR professional to remove the bias and change the mindset because I think the number one thing we have to let go is that most people aren't professional resume writers. There is no list on a skill set that says, must be able to write a great resume. And so as recruiters and hiring managers, we're looking at a resume, we're making assumptions based on job titles, skill, like we're making assumption on skill because of the

college degree, which there is no data that says somebody in an entry-level non-specialized role is stronger for a role, whether you have a degree or not. There is no data. It's an assumption and a bias. And if this formatting stinks on a resume, or if you have a misspelled word, I mean, I've been guilty of it, but I'm the CEO and I'm a terrible speller. And I am confident I had a misspelled word in my LinkedIn post yesterday. But you're not saying that I can't do my job, but yet we're saying that when we read a resume. And so that's on the onus of the person reading the resume to look beyond the paper, look beyond the resume, and not create assumptions. Also, we have a lot of job gaps these days. There are more job gaps today when you look at a resume than I've experienced in 20 years. And I've had to get over that bias because we have an aging population, we have folks taking care of their parents and their grandparents, and so they're taking pauses in their jobs. So your resume states you've got a break in service, so we're making an assumption when we read that, but the resume doesn't tell the story. So we have to talk to people about their story. And we haven't talked about AI yet, but AI can't tell that story either. So we're all scared that the recruiter may go away because of AI. But that human component of understanding where the skills are, understanding people's stories, and being able to assess the skills, I don't think we're there yet. And I don't know that AI will ever be able to do that. And, you know, the other piece is COVID screwed up a lot of people's job history, right? So we're post-COVID. And then transportation. We also assume that somebody can't do a job because they're late for an interview, but somebody that relies on public transportation actually could have amazing skills. They just rely on public transportation because they need a job and they could be a diamond in the rough, but they rely on public transportation. So like we talk about barriers, but if we remove some of these biases and systemic barriers to the process, then we're opening our aperture up to this untapped talent that we wouldn't have considered before.

**Shari Simpson:**

You brought up a couple of points that I want to disruminate on because I think they're so good and I really want to make sure the audience hears it. You brought up we're not professional resume writers. No one taught me how to do that. I never took a class in college. I never took a class in high school. I

mean, hopefully that's changing a little bit now, but you're right. That's not a skill that people are necessarily taught. So you go on the internet, you try to figure out maybe you're doing that at the local library, right? Maybe you don't have a home computer to do it on or you're trying to do it on your phone or, you know, all those things. And you're absolutely right. I am also a terrible speller. I rely on Grammarly like it's nobody's business. And every once in a while, my husband will ping me and he'll be like, hey, you should check your LinkedIn post. You totally butchered that word. I'm like, dang it. So I feel that, I think that's so important, especially if the role does not require you to do emails and typing and whatever. Do we actually care that you spelt something wrong or right if you can do the job? That's a mindset shift we definitely need to get through. The other thing I wanted to make sure I kind of dug into was that transportation piece. You know, I've been in HR over 20 years and there was a time when I was working in one organization where we were talking about attracting talent. We had one warehouse where we just couldn't seem to get the talent that we needed. And what we ended up doing is a little bit of research on our end to understand bus routes because there was a bus stop within, you know, a block or so of this building. And so we got real strategic about where we were going to target advertising and working with local communities so that we could tap into all of these workers who rely on public transportation. But it required us to have that mindset change to understand that, like, if we actually do want to attract this population, we have to change our approach to attracting the talent and really making ourselves available. So I love those two points. I think it's something we don't think enough or talk enough about. And it seems so simple, right? It seems like, like almost a no duh in so many ways, but also we're so busy on so many other things we don't, don't kind of drill into that.



**Michelle Sims:**

Well, but we've also followed our very traditional filters. We're just programmed to do it. And so if we're not intentional about questioning that and changing filters and changing the process and almost making it to where it's a checklist, like make sure you don't do this. You don't give a checklist to make sure you do things in your to-do list. Like here we re-engineer and we do checklists for this is what you shouldn't do. Make sure you're not doing this. That's where the mindset shift needs to happen.

**Shari Simpson:**

So good, Michelle. I love this discussion. One last question before we jump off. And I'd love to get, you know, kind of your two cents on this. What's one outdated mindset or policy in hiring right now that you would love if HR could just retire it immediately and never do it again?

**Michelle Sims:**

I would say, number one, is that we've got to dispel that a four-year degree is a universal proxy for competency. It's not. It is not the proxy for privilege. It is not the proxy for opportunity. It is not the proxy for prosperity. There will always be purpose in a four-year degree, but to single that out as an assumption that it will get you where you need to go is a terrible assumption.

**Shari Simpson:**

Such a good way to end our conversation, Michelle. Thank you so much for sitting down and having this conversation. I feel like we could have done an episode that was two hours long on this topic. So really appreciate you.

**Michelle Sims:**

Oh, thank you for having me. And it's obviously you can see I'm passionate and I appreciate the opportunity to share.

**Shari Simpson:**

I hope you enjoyed today's episode. You can find show notes and links at [theHRMixtape.com](http://theHRMixtape.com). Come back often and please subscribe, rate and review.