

- 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 on the podcast today is Elizabeth Varghese. She is a global business leader, people and technology strategist, board director, and an author. Elizabeth, I'm so excited to have you on the podcast today.

- Thank you so much for inviting me. This is a great topic and so much to discuss and I really appreciate being include, Shari. So looking forward to this.

- As I was looking at your bio in prep of our call today, I am just fascinated at all the work you do. One of the things that you do is you're on the Council of Advisors for SETI Institute which works with NASA. That's really fascinating, I'd love for you to start maybe just how you got into that space and how you got into the space where we talk about the future of work in general.

- So yeah, so I am involved in the SETI Institute. Fabulous organization that has worked for decades, really focused on understanding the meaning and origin of life in the universe, looking at astrobiology, and the SETI Institute is fascinating because it's really asking the questions that they work on in partnership with the leading space agencies and companies like IBM and Intel. So they really work at the intersection of what we do know and work on with technology and the questions and answers we need to resolve. I really got into the space of space, to use that bad pun, because well, candidly, I've always been a space enthusiast. I grew up in India in the 70s and the 80s where looking at and understanding what could happen in outer space with astronomy was really just a glimpse, a window into all the possibilities that were available to all of us, me included. So I grew up reading a lot, being interested in astronomy, and that's really how I got into that area, and then engage with the SETI Institute over the years. I've also recently just published a book on commercial space exploration and the implications on geopolitics law. Organizations and leadership talk about hybrid and virtual work, right, in our space. So the book is called "Stellar Singularity." It's available on Amazon. We'll have the paperbacks out shortly. But the reason why again, I wrote the book is because it lays out some of the considerations and things we are seeing with the acceleration of technology and where we are are moving as not just a business community, not just as a global community. But as a civilization, technology is transforming us and it's transforming us in different arenas, right? It's transforming us in outer space as I write about in the book, but it's also transforming us in how we interact and how we work which kind of brings us back to the point of yes, the future of work is impacted by all these things and I'm fascinated at the different variables coming at us and trying to make

sense of what that all looks like for us.

- As you think about the future of work, what are your thoughts on hybrid work? And the reason I ask that question is 'cause I think as talent is evolving and as we have gone through this pandemic slash endemic now, there is this situation potentially brewing between those who can work remote and those who cannot, and how we deal with a hybrid work environment. How do you see that evolving over the next several years?

- So the truth is that we've always had people who could work more effectively in the office and those who struggled with it, right? For a variety of reasons, for a variety of personal choices or life situations. We've always had people who were primary caregivers and had to drop the kids off at daycare and pack lunches, and you had people who could just show up in the office, la di da, without a care in the world, and that's okay. Or you might have had people, I use that example in the case of gender roles, right? So you always had women who were doing some of that and then showing up into the office. You had men who maybe weren't doing as much, but again, not trying to draw lines there. But we did have those instances as the working world has evolved and you also had people maybe with disabilities or other new atypical challenges may have struggled with coming into the office, right? Or found that more uncomfortable than working virtually or working remotely. But the pandemic has shown as I think is that the requirements to be tethered to a particular work location are not really a function of technology in the sense that can technology make this happen. That discussion's gone into the trash, right? Can do, it can be done. It's not also a question of can people work remotely? Yes, people can collaborate remotely. They can contribute, they can be ambitious, they can be productive. And what it's really shown all of us is that that decision on whether we bring people and tether them to a physical work location is sometimes a function of the work itself, right? You might postal employees or retail employees who need to stock shelves, but a great part of it for the working population in the developed world, in the formal economy, it's a question of choice. It's a question of decision, rights, and governance. Somebody somewhere is thinking okay, I need people to be in the office. I need to see what they're doing. So the pandemic kind of showed us that, showed us what's required, what's not required, and what's possible. So in that context, I think it's forced us or helped us to really understand questions, some of those paradigms and those assumptions we've made about remote and hybrid work which I personally believe is a great thing because now we are more intentional about requiring somebody to be in the office or even confronting our own inherent bias about someone who is in the office or not. So I think that's actually been very beneficial and we'll see more conversation on those topics which I believe again, is part of what kind of sets us free and helps us be more productive.

- What other changes have you seen in the workforce as a result of the pandemic?

- I think the pandemic highlighted and magnified a lot of things that unfortunately already existed. Now of course, there were some new things that the pandemic caused us to come to terms with. I won't discuss those, but the truth is that the conversations we had around how work needs to get done or where it needs to get done has always been a point of contention and discussion. We've always had multi or intergenerational differences in how people have perceived work, how they've perceived the employment relationship. The pandemic just magnified or just shown a light on all of those things. It didn't really necessarily create some of those things. Now one example I give often when I talk about this is when I worked with a consulting firm many years ago, pre-pandemic, a good decade almost before the pandemic, we had started seeing this trend where senior managers who were the cusp of making partner were not really as engaged by the idea of just the corner office and the idea of just making partner, right? It wasn't just about progression and working for the gold watch. People had already started asking, right? What is the meaning of this progression, this career path? Is it meaningful to my work-life balance, to my personal goals? Is getting that corner office really worth all these other things I may have to set aside on the way, and people were making choices. So I think that became something we were talking about already, right? We talked about the Gen Xs, the Gen Ys, the Millennials, et cetera. So that's kind of my view on how this is evolving and in terms of where I think things are gonna go further is that we are going to see more and more technology allowing us to one, ensure trust in the sense that, and I'll explain that in a second, and also in some ways monitor trust. Trust really becomes the biggest variable that helps organizations decide what to do. And when I talk about enabling trust is that one, technology's like blockchain, I write about that in my book. Blockchain reaction provides much more validation of credentials identity. So that's gonna allow us to actually have more trusted remote work, right? Because you can have technology validate people. On the other hand, we are starting to see more and more at least conversations around monitoring keystrokes and productivity of employees, a contentious topic. But people are also saying okay, you know what? Maybe it's okay to use some of these or people really don't care that I have, because you know what? They don't care about cookies tracking their activity anyway and we've always had companies that said you can visit a type of site during work hours, right? So they're just also kind of starting to extend that a little bit more in terms of monitoring activity. So anyway, so I think we're seeing both those things which again, in my humble opinion, just an exacerbation of old things, nothing very different.

- You mentioned a couple things, blockchain, monitoring software. I think about other things like Bitcoin and Web3 and all of this technology that's coming out. How do leaders prepare for this new next

when it comes to all of this technology if they don't even know where to begin? I think we reach those points. I'm in my 40s and so these are new terms to me, and I'm like okay, now I need to do some more research, whereas my children are getting inundated with this kind of technology now. So how do we prepare our leaders for now for some of these things and for the future skillsets that they're gonna need in a more technology-utilized environment?

- When I talk to clients and CIOs about the future of work, one of the things that comes up a lot is cloud-native skills or cloud-native development which is basically developing or building things that are accessed through the cloud, right? And I kind of think of that as a good example of almost the generational differences 'cause I'm in my 40s too, and I have teenagers and younger kids, right? And the way they approach technology, they are technology natives, right? And I am admittedly not, but I've kind of embraced it. I've immigrated or migrated into that because of my interest or by necessity. So I think it's important for us as leaders and business folk to really understand that there is this kind of state of mind where you are technology native. Now you may not be born like that if you're from a different discipline, for example. If you're in the arts or from a different generation or time of exposure to technology, or it might be just by choice or the circumstance of your employment journey. But you can immigrate into that world of being a technology native, right? You can learn, you can absorb, you can network with people who you can assimilate, right? And I kind of use that example because they are in some ways two different states of being, but we kind of all need to be technologically native especially as we are seeing an increase in the ubiquitous of technology, it's everywhere, right? We talk about augmented intelligence or artificial intelligence. And as technology becomes more useful to us, it's really important for us to really know that it should not operate as a black box. We have to know what's in there, what's driving it? Who's setting up the cookies and what do they do on our laptops, right? So that's I think kind of the landscape of what we are journeying through. And for leaders, I think the folks who are in different places, right? With this technology in nativity, some of it is really understanding that you do have to study it. You do have to be interested in it. You have to be accepting of it. And again, if I use the immigration analogy, right? You move from one country to another. You have to understand and want to understand the culture. You have to understand and be interested in what opportunities it can provide for you. So I think if you kind of adopt that mindset, it's important and if leaders don't, I think the risk is that one, from a business organization perspective, you could just get left behind. You're not gonna be on that spaceship to success if you're not gonna be interested, and two, I think, and we've seen this a lot, right? With organizations that have adapted their strategy differently to the evolution of technology, you're just not gonna have, not evolving, gonna be static. And I'll say one other thing in terms of the evolution and the adoption of technology, right? We are

seeing that traditional consulting, for example, right? Or we had all these strategy consultants who would sit down and say oh, what's your business strategy? What's your market, competitive approach? How are you going to get ahead of everybody else? And then they would come up with a technology strategy that helps you implement that strategy. What we are seeing today is that your business strategy is actually defined by the possibilities of technology. They're inextricably linked, right? So if you understand what technology can do, you can actually come up with an entirely different radical, completely successful business model, right? So that complete integration of technology with business strategy I think is a big part of what we're seeing and again, leaders need to understand that, and we can all learn it, right? So it's not a closed boundary that nobody can cross. We just have to want to get there.

- The example you gave about going to a new country and wanting to learn all about that country, that really resonates with me as we talk about learning technology, right? It's this desire to just inundate yourself in a culture, in everything about the culture. How does it work, what's the politics? How does transportation work? All of the inner workings of a culture that you think about is a really great way to think about learning technology, so I super appreciate that example. As you think about this next chapter and work and the marriage to technology, what are you most excited for?

- I'm personally very excited and inspired by the fact that technology is bringing us to a point where we can allow access to opportunity to be untethered or unfettered by one, where you sit while you work, right? You and I, we are still working together and having a great conversation, so technology is helping us do that. And when that happens, it's going to ensure that the best and the brightest of our global community can tap into opportunities and access the same kind of jobs, and education, and collaborative cohorts that they may have been restricted to by their physical or geographical location. So I think technology is really democratizing opportunity. And I mentioned my work on blockchain and the use of digital credentials and digital wallets for skills will ensure that if you and I are looking for a coder, we can find the best coder no matter where they sit in the world and we can figure out a way to work with them, right? We don't have to worry about flying them into New York or wherever we are. And the second is that as we are moving increasingly to a skill-based economy, technology is gonna help us validate the credentials of these people around the world and really ensure that remote and hybrid work is not just feasible, it's also something we are comfortable with and we all use as needed so that we can also kind of have a better, richer life on many levels.

- Well, Elizabeth, I couldn't agree with you more. I'm so excited to see what is in our future for work and how we intersect with technology on an everyday basis in our organization. So thanks for

taking a few minutes to chat with me.

- Of course, this was so much fun. Thank you so much, Shari.

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