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# Empowering HR to Lead the World of Work





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The world's Chief Human Resources Officers (CHROs) have had a torrid time of late, having to manage the disruptions of the pandemic while building new capabilities to support diversity and inclusion, environmental initiatives, skills shortages, hybrid working, and a workforce which is proving harder to retain. These topics and more were the subject of a roundtable discussion hosted by 6 Degrees Media and supported by Oracle and Deloitte, where HR leaders including **Redbubble's Chief People and Culture Officer Meahan Callaghan**, **Oracle's Vice President Product Strategy, Talent, Chris Havrilla**, and **Deloitte's Partner Amanda Flouch** and **Director Sameer Jain** examined how these challenges can be solved, and the role technology can play in solving them.

**T**he COVID-19 crisis put Australia's Human Resources leaders on the frontline of their organisations' response, as they strove to keep their people both safe and productive.

For Meahan Callaghan, Chief People and Culture Officer at the online creative marketplace Redbubble, COVID was just the latest – albeit most disruptive – change she has encountered in a people-focused career that stretches back into the mid-1990s.

Callaghan is maintaining the pace of change at Redbubble by closely examining the processes within her function and those across the organisation more broadly, to determine if they are truly fit for Redbubble's future. She believes this analysis will be essential for delivering the kind of flexibility that Redbubble now requires.

"We're looking at everything we're doing, and asking, 'why are we doing it that way?'" Callaghan said. "Why are job roles the way they are? Is that the way the world's moving? Why do we have this tall office building and only every fourth chair has somebody in it?"

A key part of this review has required the examination of everything the company does, to ask whether or not it truly works for the people involved. One outcome has been a policy that only requires many staff to come into the office once a quarter, and putting responsibility on to their managers to find compelling reasons why workers might want to come in more often.

Callaghan said the fact that Redbubble could implement this policy flowed directly from the company's culture of trust. This same thinking was now permeating other aspects of how Redbubble, including how it undertook performance reviews.

"We're calling them 'achievement reviews', because we're only worried about what people have actually done – what impact have they had on the company," Callaghan said. "What we're saying is 'come here and do something inspiring and impactful to move our company forward'."

## Paradigm Shift

The extent of the changes impacting HR-related roles is reflected in the added urgency in one of its most traditionally important activities – talent attraction, recruitment and learning and development.

According to Deloitte Partner Amanda Flouch, this task has become more challenging in recent years due to skills shortages, low unemployment and availability of talent, meaning more emphasis is being placed on re-skilling, development and retention of existing staff. “It is incumbent on organisations to determine the skills they require and how to support your people to grow and develop,” Flouch said. “Learning and development and supporting your people to reskill is a really important way to demonstrate you are investing in them.”

We need to plan ahead and determine the skills needs for future. There are also significant opportunities for industry to partner with the education sector including with our Universities and VET to design solutions to help address wicked problems.

Another area of emerging importance in workforce development has been a growing appreciation of the importance of diversity and inclusion in creating high-performing teams.

At Redbubble, Callaghan said she had been running combined engagement and diversity surveys to understand the extent to which people felt included and acknowledged. The company had also extended its examination of diversity to encompass neurodiversity, to ensure managers had the skills they needed to lead a diverse range of people in a remote workforce.

“If I don't do those things, our employees will leave to go to companies that do, so it's a pretty compelling thing to do,” Callaghan said. “I don't want anyone's mental health to be worse because they work at a company where I'm the head of HR, so it's extremely important to us.”

## A Sustainable Workforce

While much has been written about the importance of organisations' environmental sustainability strategies and their crossover with HR policies, attendees also discussed a different take on sustainability – that of the sustainability of the individual. With mental health and burnout now a prominent issue within workforces, Deloitte Director Sameer Jain said it was important for HR leaders to consider workers' experiences and the impact that burnout had on productivity and morale.

Jain believed this problem had been exacerbated through the pandemic by the tendency for people to become trapped in non-stop 30-minute Zoom meetings. As a result, he said it was important for HR leaders to pay more attention to improve employee wellbeing. “Our duty of care is no longer defined as when the employee walks out the door,” Jain said. “Designing wellbeing programs that meet the employee in their flow of work, as and when they want it, is really important.”

Jain said this had led many organisations to now design and deliver programs that helped workers understand and manage their different attributes, while also helping them better manage the many tasks they were asked to perform.



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“Pressure in itself is not bad – pressure is an energy, it really gets us focused,” Jain said. “What really is dysfunctional is when the pressure converts into stress. Stress comes when people have very little agency over the work that they do and over timelines around it, or when they do ‘tasks’, as opposed to work with a purpose or a meaning. This is the part that we need to watch out for as leaders.”

He added that one innovative approach that was known to work was to change how workers viewed their supervisors, to see them as customers when setting expectations about accomplishing work. “When it comes to customers, it’s us who are setting their experience,” Jain said. “So why can’t we do that internally as well?”

### Ultra-Flexibility

Another of the defining traits of the modern workforce is the need for greater flexibility, which is most often reflected in many workers’ preference for to work from home.

However, according to Oracle’s Vice President Product Strategy, Talent, Chris Havrilla, this was just one manifestation of a much deeper change.

“We no longer live in a world of certainties, we live in a world of probabilities, and the best we can do is learn to ask great questions to solve, to achieve,” Havrilla said. “Things are changing and evolving all the time, and whether it is good or bad, they’re realities, they’re likely different for everybody. We have to learn a new muscle set about how to absorb change, and figure out how you are going to use these changes or disruptions to your advantage, staying laser-focused on your outcomes.”

Havrilla said this capability would prove critical for helping people and organisations manage change in a way that was fast, scalable, and based on insights. “That’s at the core of being agile,” Havrilla said.

The value of agility was demonstrated in the early days of the pandemic, when Havrilla said many organisations saw productivity rise. She said the goal now was to understand why and to ensure that productivity did not fall again – although she said for many organisations this was already happening.

She added that the key to maintaining an upwards trajectory was often the exact opposite of what many leaders felt most comfortable with – and that was to release control.

“Leaders and managers didn’t have control when the pandemic started,” Havrilla said. “We really witnessed the rise of the individual, and workers were empowered with HOW to get their work done – they actually had agency. The world of work today is about arming people with the tools and information they need to make decisions and take action – not control their tasks and activities.

“The desire to give people more agency through greater control over their working hours and environments was not an option that could be extended to all roles, however, such as factory workers, shop staff, or delivery drivers – but even they still had to adapt new ways of working. I believe all workers are wired to perform, but we’re so busy trying to keep command and control rather than an approach of commitment

and collaboration. Giving people agency over their work – and holding them accountable to outcomes versus output – is the biggest thing you can do to unlock their performance and potential.”

According to Flouch, while the working environment could not always be redesigned to enable remote work, there were benefits that could flow through reinforcing the purpose and importance of the work these people were doing.

## Take Action

While each of these changes was causing significant angst for HR leaders, Jain said it was important to remember that collectively these challenges were elevating the visibility – and the importance – of HR within their organisations.

“While there was a debate previously about whether HR is on the board or not, nobody is questioning that these days,” Jain said. “HR is formally on the board, and talent agenda and skills is formally on the table.”

While each of the challenges confronting HR were significant, Jain added that CHROs could take comfort through knowing that their lives were also being made easier through the development of new data driven capabilities to assist them with monitoring, planning, and forecasting.

This meant that when CHROs were looking to bolster their organisation’s skills, they also needed to invest in their functions’ own skills in relation to data.

“There's a very powerful imperative to do more with data driven insights and data driven actions, and then measure the outcomes of those actions,” Jain said. “That's one of the skills that not many HR teams would count as within their boundary, but it's one of the skills that is important.”

According to Havrilla, it was also important that these hard skills were accompanied by investments in the soft skills that enabled them to be applied effectively. “The harder skills can be learned, but problem solving, curiosity, empathy, and adaptive thinking or critical thinking – we need to spend a little bit more time developing those things,” Havrilla said.

Callaghan agreed that the need for soft skills was evident across the entire workforce. “Systems thinking is so important now,” Callaghan said. “Because we are remote, we need to stop operating in a silo and understand how it all hangs together.

## The New World Beyond

For Callaghan, if there was one lasting benefit of the COVID crisis, it was to remind everyone within HR functions who they really were responsible for. “We do look after humans, and that's probably the thing that's really hit us in the face,” Callaghan says. “If you don't have your health, you have nothing. And if you don't have connection with family, you have nothing. And if your mental health goes a little off the track, that's really hard.

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6 Degrees Media was established by Angela Horvat, former Editor and Publisher of award-winning publications including *Computerworld*, *Information Age*, *My Business*, *The Who's Who of Financial Services* and Founder of FST Media; and Emma Charter, one of Australia's most connected and respected media and events strategists with more than 15 years' experience in delivering C-Level engagement strategies for clients in Australia and the UK. Together, they lead a team of Australia's most talented and driven conference producers, technology and business journalists and event managers to create content-driven experiences across C-level roundtables, custom events and large-scale conferences. For more information, please visit [6DegreesMedia.com.au](http://6DegreesMedia.com.au)