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# Redefining Employee Experience During the Great Workforce Reset The CHRO Imperative





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The world's Chief Human Resources Officers came under enormous pressure during the COVID-19 crisis as they battled to keep their people safe, happy, and productive. As we enter the post-pandemic period, they must now satisfy workers who expect better experiences and are not afraid to move on when they aren't delivered. The road ahead for CHROs was the key topic of a recent virtual roundtable hosted by 6 Degrees Media and event partner Oracle, where the **founder of the innovation consultancy Inventium, Dr Amantha Imber**, and the **Chief Human Resources Officer at SEEK, Kathleen McCudden**, were joined by **Oracle's Vice President for Product Strategy and Talent Management for Fusion-HCM Development, Chris Havrilla**, and a host of senior HR executives to discuss strategies for managing a changing workforce.

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**A**s organisations across Australia have emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic, they have found their workforces forever changed.

For many Australians, working from home has been an experience they are not rushing to give up. For some, skills shortages are making it attractive to move to higher-paid roles at other employers.

For Chief Human Resources Officers (CHROs), these challenges follow on from what has been one of the most disruptive periods for workforce management in human history. CHROs and their peers are having to prepare for a world where the models of workforce engagement are not yet defined, making the 'future of work' the hottest discussion topic in town.

In her role as the founder of the innovation consultancy Inventium, Amantha Imber has devoted much of her working life to considering the future of work for her employees and her clients.

She said that while an exact description of the future of work was difficult to define, some aspects were more easily discerned, and most prominent among these was the need for flexibility.

"Everyone in the world has stepped up their game and it's very normal to be able to work from home and the office, but I think that organisations that take this a step even further are the ones that are going to succeed in keeping and attracting the best talent," Imber said. "Instead of mandating to people that they have to be in the office, giving people more choice over when they're in the office and how many days is a really good thing.

"Also, in terms of flexibility, it's not just where you work from, it's the hours that you work. The more choice you can give people in what hours they are working, the better."

This was supported by the Chief Human Resources Officer at SEEK, Kathleen McCudden, who said her organisation's research had shown the desire to work from home had increased threefold since before the pandemic, and that around 40 per cent of roles could now be performed remotely. However, she cautioned that simply allowing people to work from home did not address some of the underlying challenges.

"While that's all very important, it's unbalanced unless there's also talk about how the team functions and what's needed for the organisation," McCudden said. "We really encourage good dialogue between managers and their people."

## A Culture of Trust

One factor concerning many attendees was the impact of hybrid working trends on organisational culture. With many workers now working from home, Imber said it was easy to assume that culture would suffer, but she stressed that there was more to creating a good culture than just face-to-face interaction.

"An easy way to deepen connections without having to be face-to-face is just to simply ask better questions," Imber said. "Many times a meeting starts with the question 'how are you?' That's not really giving much, and that's not really deepening the relationship."

"It's really valuable for leaders to think about the better questions they can ask because, if they can ask better questions, they're going to get deeper answers and they're going to strengthen that bond."

When considering culture, McCudden added that it was also critical to ensure that one of the most fundamental underlying requirements – trust – was in place first between workers and the organisation.

"If you do a good job of hiring people, most people are well intentioned," McCudden said. "If you have guidelines which treat people like adults and you afford a lot of trust to your people it pays back in spades in terms of employee engagement."

The notion of trust was an important one for attendees, with one stating that while it was critical, it was also hard to achieve and retain.

"Whilst I love this empowerment that we're able to provide for our people, it takes a lot of time. You have to listen deeply, and one size does not fit all. We try to give people an hour of power back in their day, but we couldn't quite decide where the hour should be. And the answer is it should really be wherever our people think that hour should land. And ultimately I trust them to get the outcomes."

## Creating Optimal Workplaces

One of the outcomes of the COVID crisis and subsequent return to the workplace has been the so-called Great Resignation, which has seen workers in some markets leaving their employers in droves.

McCudden said SEEK's research showed that while attrition in Australia had picked up, it had not done so at the same levels seen in the US.



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“What we’re seeing is a record number of jobs being advertised, so companies are looking to either scale up after downsizing, or they’re experiencing a lot of pressure in terms of the growth ambitions or transformation work,” McCudden said. “Conversely, we have the lowest number of applicants per role at the moment. That’s firstly because of demand, but secondly there’s a level of hesitation that people have about changing jobs.”

McCudden believed the greater volume of resignations in the US was driven by burnout and fatigue, coupled with people’s confidence that they could take a break and then easily return to work.

One factor that attendees agreed was critical to ensuring the return of staff to the workplace and their long-term retention was to give them a workplace they wanted to return to. At SEEK, efforts in this regard have been rewarded by it taking out top billing in the AFR Best Places to Work awards for 2021, and then scoring a place in the Top 10 Best Places to Work in the Technology category in 2022.

According to McCudden, while SEEK was constantly striving to improve, one of the key factors that had enabled it to create a great workplace was its willingness to listen to its workers. “Our people tell us what they want,” McCudden said. “They tell us what’s working and they tell us what’s not working. We have over 98 per cent participation rates in our employee surveys, and the reason for that is that we repeat back to people what they’ve told us.

“We also use a lot of data science to actually understand sentiment analysis and we also then share that feedback with people openly. And then we talk about what we can do, and we also talk about what we can’t do, because we can’t necessarily do everything that people are wanting us to do.”

### The Data-Driven CHRO

According to Oracle’s Vice President Product Strategy and Talent Management for Fusion-HCM Development, Chris Havrilla, these conditions provided a great opportunity for CHROs to understand and utilise the latest in data, analytics, and insights to better understand their workforce’s performance and disposition.

“They are using data for analysis, decision support, and using storytelling to not only drive improvements, but really take ownership of facilitating work, workforce, and workplace solutions to evolving business and talent needs,” Havrilla said. “I am starting to see people realise that we don’t live in a world of certainties anymore, and that we live in a world of probabilities with no real answers that we know to be true. When we don’t have any real answers, it becomes about what questions should we be asking. And in a world of probabilities, they that asks the best questions wins.”

Havrilla said many CHROs now are using data for workforce redesign and extending it to the full workforce ecosystem. This is leading them to put more emphasis on developing advanced data capabilities, including for forward-looking, real-time insights. “The one thing I think people are getting, is that ‘people data’ is ‘business data,’” Havrilla said. “So how do we leverage that to ask better questions and then facilitate seeking the answers? That takes a mindset shift.”

When CHROs invested in their data capabilities, this also opened the possibilities for them to expand their responsibilities beyond workforce management to also help re-think the design of the work that people were performing. “The work, the workforce, and the workplace has changed,” Havrilla said. “We’re moving more and more towards helping connect workers to what outcomes need to be achieved and why – with the worker determining how, and often, where work gets done.”

“Instead of it being about work output – tasks, activities, and things like that – it is becoming more about outcomes, and giving workers more agency and choice in how it’s achieved. We have to start helping leaders and managers be less about command and control of output – and more about commitment and collaboration, around unlocking their worker’s potential and performance.”

Collectively, these presented CHROs with an opportunity to step up and be bolder in terms of the role they played within their organisations.

“It’s about shifting away from the traditional roles of standardising and enforcing workforce policies, to a new responsibility for continuously orchestrating the work, workforce, and workplace in an agile fashion and driving innovation across the enterprise,” Havrilla said. “As a result of HR’s handling of COVID-19 challenges, both business and HR leaders have become more confident in HR’s ability to continue to navigate future shifts and changes.”

## Burnout Busters

With many workers now reporting heightened levels of burnout, attendees discussed the need for CHROs to pay close attention to the feelings and performance of staff at all times. Imber said this was something that she discussed frequently with her own people, and with her clients.

“Something tactical that we’ve taught to a lot of our clients is finishing your day mindfully, by doing what we call our shut down ritual,” Imber said. “It involves just writing two sentences to book-end your day so that you can actually go and do some non-work activities.”

Imber said those two sentences described the things that a person had made progress on that day, and what they needed to do tomorrow for it to be a great day. “Research from Harvard Business School professor of psychology Teresa Amabile says that making progress on things that matter to us is the single biggest motivator at work,” Imber said. “We found double digit increases in productivity and wellbeing, just from book-ending your day with that simple activity.”

McCudden concluded by reminding attendees that they too needed to be mindful of burnout, especially given the challenges of the past two years and the ongoing pressure they faced to manage a workforce in transitional times.

“Look after yourselves, because actually what we’re having to do now is do a lot of really deep thinking, and if we’re feeling burnt out and we’re constantly busy, we’re not going to be in the right shape to be able to do that,” McCudden said. “Take a break and create the space that you need to feel like you’re nurturing yourself and then you can be good for the organisation.”



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