Trish 0:00

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Steve 0:48

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Speaker 1 1:52

Welcome to At Work in America, the podcast that leads the conversation on the future of work, proudly sponsored by Paychex and Workhuman. We go beyond the headlines to uncover bold ideas, fresh perspectives, and the real stories of people shaping workplaces for the better. And now here are your hosts, Steve Boese and Trish Steed, bringing you the insights and trends that will inspire what's next in the world of work.

Steve 2:26

welcome to the At Work in America show. My name is Steve Boese. I'm so happy to be here today. I'm with Trish Steed, of course. Trish, how are you?

Trish 2:32

I'm fantastic. How are you? I

Steve 2:35

'm well, we are not in the same place, although we look like we have the same colored wall behind us, which is pretty cool, and even Caitlin MacGregor, who's here with us from Plum. Hi, Caitlin. She's the CEO and co founder of Plum. I'll bring you right in, because your wall looks also similar.

Caitlin MacGregor 2:48

Thanks for having me. I'm really excited to talk with both of you today.

Trish 2:53

Yeah, you would think we're all like in offices next to each other, right?

Steve 2:56

Yeah, but we're probably thousands of miles apart, right?

Trish 3:00

yeah, exactly.

Steve 3:02

I'll get right to it, Trish. We already said hi to Caitlin. Caitlin MacGregor is the CEO and co founder of Plum. Plum is one of the coolest, most innovative companies in the HR tech space. We've got a chance to meet with Caitlin a couple times, do some demos. We've actually experienced plum for ourselves. We'll talk about that some. But let me just say hi Caitlin again, and maybe give us a little bit of a just give us the 90 seconds on Plum and you and then we'll go from there.

Caitlin MacGregor 3:31

We are the leading durable skills so those transferable soft skills assessment that's used on high volume hires, early career hires top of the funnel, and then use throughout the employee career for employer development.

Steve 3:49

Love it, love it. And kind of approaching things, when was Plum founded, Caitlin?

Caitlin MacGregor 3:55

We're 13 years old.

Steve 3:59

But not, not 50, right? There are companies in this space going that go back 6070, even 80 years, right? So a kind of innovative, different approach to some of the ways you you've taken on these challenges.

Caitlin MacGregor 4:12

Yeah, we really wanted to disrupt the legacy psychometric assessment space, soft skill assessment space, by creating a modern user experience that really benefits the individual job seeker, individual employee. We really wanted to create that LinkedIn experience based on not what somebody's done historically, but based on what they could do if given the opportunity. And there's a whole body of research, real science around performance and retention. And it's always pointed to the fact that, you know, what really makes somebody succeed in their career comes down to what drives them and gives them a sense of self worth and what drains them. And, you know, ends up being the source of burnout and loss of productivity, because it's something that, you know, it takes a lot of effort from somebody. So we want. It to create a positive user experience for getting that data on every candidate and every employee, so you could make sure that people are matched to roles where they're gonna be happy, filled and thrive.

Trish 5:11

You know, I'm so grateful that you created this tool because, or this entire platform, because, as someone, when I worked in HR, we were constantly trying to assess soft skills, especially it was so difficult to do, or even just asking someone, what are your skills, right when it comes to some of those things, and I find that people say what they think you want to hear and or what you know, maybe what they think they are really good at. And I love that this doesn't just say yes, you can do this particular skill. It's that piece you just mentioned, what really excites you versus what drains you, right? Because I think there are a lot of things that we have skills in, but if it's really draining, your colleagues need to know that your boss needs to know that, so that you can maybe direct your career a certain direction, right?

Caitlin MacGregor 5:58

And we think that people are self aware. We think that we know what drives and drains us. But what's fascinating is that, yes, when you take the assessment and you get your results, you know you can go like, Oh yeah. That accurately reflects me. But the words to describe it, the actual quantification to see how that ranks amongst others and how you're really prioritizing your time. It really is this roadmap to say you're going to deliver your best results if you focus here, and if you really want to develop things, this is the GPS to tell you where to then go and look for content to go and upskill go and spend time. So being able to have that real, quantified data around you know, your level of innovation and communication, execution and teamwork allows for us to be much more prescriptive with how we set ourselves up for success and how we're able to support and interact with other people and set them up for success.

Trish 6:51

Yeah, I thought that it was really interesting too, that you're not just talking about that skill, each skill by itself. You're then breaking it down further so that when someone takes the assessment, they can see, I love it's like a little battery, how how full or how empty it is, right in terms of how draining it is, or how, I guess, how exciting it is for you to do it. I know Steve and I both took the assessment for example, and it's really revolutionized the way we work together. We spent the time then comparing them and figuring out that just because I'm doing this certain activity, or he's doing a certain activity, it might be really draining for me and where it isn't for him. So it really did help us not just even develop ourselves, but but think about the way that work gets done most effectively and most productively. Could you maybe talk a little bit about that in terms of just productivity for an organization when they're really putting people in those right spots where they can excel?

Caitlin MacGregor 7:49

I mean, I think a great example right now is there's a lot of pressure for organizations to adopt generative AI, to adopt AI in your day to day practices, so that you're more efficient and more productive as an employee. The reality is that we could actually be identifying who in an organization are the most innovative people that you know, really thrive on innovation. They're driven by it. They naturally, in their spare time, you know, experiment with things like AI. They seek out of the box opportunities. They feel really fulfilled by getting a chance to be an early adopter and do things that are new and, you know, ones that are really good at adapt, adapting really quickly. So that, you know, they're not interested in repeating the status quo. They're not interested in just the same old, same old. They are looking to do things differently and and change things up so you can actually identify who in an organization are the most innovative, the most adaptive, and let them have a head start, let them figure out what works best at your organization, what tools, what strategies, what processes. And then you can go to people that maybe are average in innovation. They're not against it. They're happy. They're just not going to lead the charge. So then they can follow the example of those that were out front. And then after you've got 70% of the organization doing things in this new way, you can then bring in the late adopters, the ones that are going to be the least adaptive, the least innovative, and then you can say, hey, well, we're all doing it this new way. Now maybe you can come on board when it's been fully de risked. So it's realizing that we don't need to have a one size fits all approach to change an organization. Same thing, a lot of organizations are investing heavily in developers to use AI. A lot of the times, the breakdown in organizations is not necessarily the skill set, it's are we communicating the why? Well, you may need to lean on the people that are so good at communicating, get them to be part of the process. You don't need more engineers in the room. You need more people with strong communication skills to explain to the organization why we're doing. Things differently, and why it's important that we embrace this and how it's going to help our customers. So it's really recognizing that everybody has a set of talents that makes them exceptional and unique, and we could benefit by utilizing what drives people at the right time to really get a competitive advantage within an organization, and by pairing people, you know, you might have somebody who's really good at innovating and adapting, and they suck at communication, well, get them to work with somebody that's great with communication to then talk about all the wins and benefits and all the things it did. So there's this opportunity to look at people through the lens of these durable skills, the soft, transferable skills that are going to endure throughout somebody's career and is going to help them be successful as the jobs change over time.

Steve 10:48

Yeah, Caitlin, I'm glad you mentioned that, because one of the reasons we reached out to you to have this conversation was we just are constantly facing in organizations today, the disruption and the transformation that's being robbed from AI tools Gen AI now, agentic AI, next week, there'll be some other kind of AI who knows, right? It doesn't really matter specifically what it is, but it is changing things, and it's impacting how organizations have to think about work, right? And it's interesting that we talked for a long time, and folks were especially younger folks, right? Were advised learn to code. Learn to code. Learn to code, for example. And that may still be a good advice, I'm not sure, but it may not be as good advice as it used to be, and the advice today might be better. Hey, work on those communication skills. Work on your adaptability. Work on your tolerance for ambiguity. Work on right the durable skills you're talking about. Caitlin, I'd love for you to share some thoughts on how you guys are thinking about this, about how AI is changing some of the skills that are going to be needed, but also impacting the jobs that need to be done, and our organizations need to think about that too, because it's, it's some things we're maybe not thinking about which I think are important to talk about.

Caitlin MacGregor 12:07

I mean, I think the first thing we need to think about is the career path. I mean, we've been talking for a long time about how the career path is no longer a ladder, that it's, you know, not necessarily linear. But what we're not talking about is the very first rung of the ladder, or the lattice, you know, the very first few years in somebody's career. Right now, AI is disrupting the entry level jobs, because that's where you have the repetition, that's where you have the administrative tasks. That's where you would put your entry level workers to just rinse and repeat a process. They would be your low cost, you know, entry level people that's being displaced by AI at an incredibly fast rate. So how is early talent going to start their career? How are they going to get the three years of necessary work experience, industry experience, if we don't have the same volume of entry level jobs as we used to. And when we had entry level jobs in the past, we thought about them like, Oh, this is just a low level task that I can put somebody on and not have to worry too much about it, and then if they're good, they'll progress in the organization. But these were kind of throw away roles. Well, if we've replaced those with automation now bringing somebody in, there's a lot more risk. There's a lot more, oh, quality of hire issues. A lot of the time, if we think about Gen X when they entered the workforce, there was this period of time where all of a sudden, if you had been doing something manually for 15 years, and now, all of a sudden, the job description is, do you know how to use a desktop computer? Do you know how to use Microsoft Word? Do you know how to use Microsoft Excel? And all of a sudden we didn't care about the 15 years of manual processes that they did. We were terrified of hiring people that weren't computer literate. And so there was this shift. Of all of a sudden, computer literacy was the most important thing. Well, now we have the opportunity to say, actually, do I want somebody to come in and do this entry level marketing job the same way as somebody at the entry level would have done for the last 5-10, years? Or do I want somebody to come in brand new, with a clean slate and think about how to do this job differently, that they learn how to do this job differently, that they learn how to produce six times the amount of volume as somebody else not using AI would have been doing. So there's this opportunity to say, Okay, what do we actually care about when it comes to early careers? Is it that they know Python? Is it that they know how to use Excel? Is it that they have their bachelor in commerce, or is it, wait a second? I want the people that are the best communicators for the communication jobs, and I want the ones that are best at teamwork for the team working jobs, and I want the ones that are best at persuading for the sales jobs. And I want the best innovators, and you know, to come in and think about doing this completely differently. The value. You of those hard skills, which now the shelf life is less than two and a half years for 50% of them to be relevant. So I like to call them perishable skills. You know, the perishable skills need to stop being the key words that everyone's getting matched to these organizations that want to be skills based organizations they want to hire for skills. They're still asking for things like the skill of Python, they're still asking for the skill of you know that they have finance experience. There is an opportunity to look at Gen Z, to look at people between 18 to 28 and say they're being the most disrupted. Their job opportunities are disappearing. But they are actually a valuable asset because they're clean slates, and there's an opportunity to have them look at everything from a digital AI-first perspective. They've never done this job before. Go and use AI to figure it out, figure out a different way of doing it, a better way of doing it. And so I think that there's a way of seeing the this completely differently, prioritizing these durable skills and looking at this generation as an asset in a new light. But we have to work quickly, because if not, we're going to lose an entire generation of people that are going to end up being 28 years old, and you're going to ask for three years of work experience, and they won't have had the opportunity to get that, because nobody would hire them in the first place, and they've been working at a fast food restaurant instead, even though they have a university degree.

Trish 16:28

I'm so glad that you explained it that way, Caitlin, because I think that it's difficult when you're you've been in the work world for a while. We know how things kind of operate the way they do, and we're also unsure of how AI is truly disrupting work and what the potential is for good. I wonder if you could comment on this so I know when you know I'm Gen X, when I joined professional services as a very young person, it was that anyone coming in as a new hire was given really work that was throw away work, right? All of the people who were in management already knew the answers. It was just busy work anyway. Do you think there's an opportunity for us as leaders now, though, and being enhanced with AI for these individuals to truly have people coming in as new hires, as a younger generation, higher and and doing more impactful work. Oh, they have the AI backing them up. Like we didn't have that, so we just got grunt work, like the time,

Caitlin MacGregor 17:30

One of the best impacts of AI is the time to learn. The time to learn has dramatically reduced. So now something that may have taken you six months or three years to learn, AI can pretty much take you through the step by step instructions on how to figure that out or how to leverage a tool to make that happen. I don't need to be an expert in Excel, but I can ask ChatGPT what I need to do in Excel. It can give me the formula, I can plug it into that cell in Excel, and now, all of a sudden, I'm a master user of Excel, because I It told me the formula to use. I mean, this is as dramatic as taking somebody and teaching them how to use a calculator. You know, having somebody that was manually doing dishes, and now having a dishwasher like the amount of time saving the amount of improvement in the efficiency anybody can learn anything with enough time and support. The question is, is, are employers comfortable with somebody coming in and learning on the job where a tool is training them, in addition to their surroundings, and that the the confidence that people could learn on the job, on their own, with outside tools, it has been low in the past, and so we need to recognize that that time to learn means we can hire people with a lot less experience, as long as we give them The opportunity. Here's the thing, I could go and become better at Excel, I would be bored to tears. It would, it would take me so much longer than somebody else. My attention to detail is the thing that it's it's very, very, very time consuming. I am more likely to make small errors because they just don't stand out for me the way it would for somebody else. So is that the best thing for me to upskill on? Is that the best job for me to go in? No, the skill sets that I have to being an entrepreneur are rare. They're really good for me to be put in situations where you need that entrepreneurial ability. So it would be a shame to put me in front of an Excel spreadsheet and say, get better at this. So part of this is also recognizing that right now, employers are facing this dilemma where they are getting 1000s of applicants for a single role because of how easy AI has made it for everybody to be perfect at all the keywords and get through the filters. And then now employers are overwhelmed with choice, and the candidates, they just want a job, so they're not necessarily applying to the ones where they're going to be most successful. So we're kind of in this lose lose volume problem, which is, if you can think about looking at these candidates differently and assessing for the durable skills that you need for success in that role, it can give you a different short list, both for the candidates and for the employer, where we now have a short list of people that are like, hey, if we give them the opportunity, if we let them learn on the job, they're going to outperform their peer, they're going to be fulfilled. They're going to stay longer. Like there is a solution in this, but it requires us to be brave and look at things through a new lens. And yes, people have talked about transferable soft skills for a lot of time, and they would like it. The difference is, this is 2025, it's absolutely possible now, and candidates love the experience. As you were talking about, it's really intuitive, it's easy, it's free for individuals to take online. You guys both were able to take it free online, share it with your family members. Like we have a solution for this, just most people are unaware that A, we need to be doing it differently and and B, that there is a way of actually assessing this and providing data around it.

Trish 21:12

One quick comment, Steve, before you turn to something else, is just that, when I'm thinking about myself taking it, you taking it. You know my daughter took it. It helps you. I think what to me, it does is it gives you a common language to talk about what really earlier you said, what you thrive at, versus what drains you. And I think that that's something in the past, I would have felt like it's a negative if I had to admit to someone that something was really just something I didn't like to do, like, when you're talking about Excel, I'm like, Oh my gosh, if I would have had, you know, any kind of AI helping me back in the day, right? That would have been an amazing thing. So I guess it's a comment, but it's also a little bit of a question, are you seeing that the people who do take the assessments, whether they're part of an organization that is using plum or whether they're an individual just wanting to kind of dip their toes in. Are you finding that they're having, I guess, maybe less anxiety about saying, I'm not really feeling this particular durable skill, but I'm also really great at these others. Is there more commonality with language now?

Caitlin MacGregor 22:21

Definitely, I mean, I think everybody is trying to figure out how to differentiate in this market, how to stand out, and how to say, This is what makes me exceptional. So the first thing is, it gives them that common language to say, Hey, this is, this is the best use of my strengths. This is the best use of how I'm going to perform. So it gives them confidence. So we see people, by the minute, sharing on LinkedIn their their top talents, and saying, Hey, like, I finally feel seen. I'm excited that employer is looking at me for what I could do if given the opportunity. And this is what really makes me exceptional. And they have words and credentials and, you know, really credibility to say this is what makes me exceptional. With that there is a certain amount of and these are the things that drain me.

Steve 23:03

Caitlin, one of the things we've been hearing a ton, not just us, everyone, really, and I'm sure you as well, and maybe your customers are talking to you about this too, is, hey, we want to change the way we're looking at candidates. We want to change the way we're looking at doing talent management. We want to rely less on formal degrees, maybe less on formal certifications, and more on skills, right? And when we hear that, a lot, sounds great, sounds pretty cool. It sort of opens up the opens opportunity up to more people, just by by definition. But it also feels like when they're talking about that, they're still talking about things like Excel and Python and Ruby on Rails, and you name it, whatever's coming next, GPT and prompts and things like that. So I wonder how you're thinking about like, you know, how that reconciles with you? I think, is it a good thing? Is it? It's we still need to talk, talk about the durable skills. And just how are you reconciling skills based hiring, with the approach to looking at talent and kind of helping people along in their careers, that that that you're advocating for?

Caitlin MacGregor 24:09

I think it's the right framework to be thinking about how to move forward. So it's actually helpful that CEOs and boards and executive teams and organizations are kind of all on board with, yeah, like, we should move towards looking at people beyond just their past experience and education. Like, I think that's a really positive change from the last 50 years, and one that's necessary. So I like the concept of being a skills based organization and skills based hiring. I think where there's room for improvement is the how is it getting done? I think we've seen a lot of first attempts where really what we're talking about is a whole bunch of keyword matching. What's the keywords in the job description? What's the keywords on somebody's resume? You know, an employee's going in and they're selecting, you know, 40 of the skills that they have, and how are those skills populating in? Like, it really has been a keyword matching game, I believe the majority of the time up and up until now. And the question is, what keywords are you selecting? The vast majority of them are either hard skills or people just picking, yeah, I'm good at communication. So 100% of job descriptions, sorry, 90% of job descriptions say that they want somebody with good communication skills, and 100% of people say they have good communication skills. So, you know, there is a flawed approach when we've over rotated on these hard skills, because that's traditionally what people could measure, and we're not treating those durable skills with as much care and precision and measurement as we could, and so part of it is great concept. Let's do better with how we're measuring and how we're weighting the different types of skills. So if you look at industrial organizational psychology, the performance and the retention come from the durable skills, like innovation, communication, execution, the you know, you can think about it in your own terms, like the last time that you had to fire somebody, did you fire them because they lacked, you know, Excel? Did you fire them because they lacked on the technical skills? No, you let them go because of a behavioral fit, because of behavioral performance. And so you know, if we know that this is the science is clear, that it comes down to these durable skills or what predict performance and retention.

Steve 26:35

We want to thank Caitlin MacGregor from Plum for spending some time with us today. We had a little bit of a technical glitch there, so apologies to anyone listening. That might have sounded a little weird there at the end, but Caitlin gave us so much great information, so we wanted to just power our way through to the end of the show.

Trish 26:56

Yeah, it was such a great show. And for anyone who is not familiar with Plum, please check them out. We will have all the links in the show notes. Take our word for it. Steve and I have used the tool ourselves. It's really helped in our business and even just for our own self awareness. And so we would encourage anyone who's listening to go check that out.

Steve 27:17

Yeah, check it out @plum.io. Do your profile. It's free, it's fun, and check it out. So Trish, thank you. This was really fun, really super interesting. And thanks for Caitlin and everybody at Plum; remember to subscribe to the HR Happy Hour network. Wherever you get your podcast, leave us a review. Five stars would be great. We'd appreciate that. And yeah, thanks so much. And thanks to our friends at Paychex and Workhuman, of course, for them and for Trish, for our guest, Caitlin MacGregor. My name is Steve Boese. Thank you so much for listening. We will see you next time, and bye for now.

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