

HRMB HR as a Profession

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SPEAKERS

David D'Souza, Mervyn Dinnen



Mervyn Dinnen 00:00

The HR Happy Hour Network is proudly supported by our friends at Workhuman. Here's a wild stat: 6 in 10 employees have never been meaningfully recognized for a work anniversary. Think about that: 5, 10, 20 years of someone's life, and too often the moment falls flat. Workhuman's service milestones makes recognition more personal, memorable, and impactful. Milestone tracking happens automatically through your HRIS. The right colleagues are inspired to share stories and congratulations, and employees get access to the rewards they actually want. Ready to make your milestones meet the moment with Workhuman? Click on the banner on this episode's page, or follow the link in the show notes to learn more. Thank you for joining us. Welcome to the HR Means Business podcast, which is part of The HR Happy Hour Network. I'm your host Mervyn Dinnen. Today, I'm going to be talking about the HR profession. My guest is David D'Souza, who has just stepped away from his role as Director of Profession at the CIPD, where he has been for about the last 10 years, David. Welcome to the HR Means Business Podcast. Would you like to introduce yourself?



David D'Souza 01:26

Yeah, certainly. My name is David. I've worked for the last 10 years at the CIPD, so professional body for HR. That's given me a brilliant opportunity to speak to hundreds of students as they've kind of entered the profession, but also leaders at every level of the profession as well, so it's been a fascinating journey. I should probably say whatever I say today very much isn't a representative CIPD's point of view. It's lovely after 10 years for it to be all my fault if I say something wrong.

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Mervyn Dinnen 01:55

You won't say anything wrong. So you spent over you spent over a decade at the CIPD. I mean, now you stepped away. What can you see I suppose more clearly about the HR profession that that maybe you you can't see as clearly when you're inside?

D

David D'Souza 02:15

I think it's less about that and what you can see inside and what you can see outside, and more about some things that are clearly coming to parts that are impacting one a range of professions, but separately within the HR profession itself, because it's a cluster of different families or things. How it's starting to impact them differently. So it's the urgency of that, it's the challenge of that, and it's the opportunity of that all rolled into one. But I think one of the things that's interesting working any professional body is you pull together groups of people with challenges in common. What I think is really interesting about what comes next is that the challenges for an L and D professional may have something in common with, but might be entirely different to someone working in recruitment, and that I think will be really interesting over the next few years, as organizations think about the way that they need to set themselves up and reorientate for what is clearly a period of quite some turmoil.

M

Mervyn Dinnen 03:11

Okay, before you joined the CIPD, you'd worked as an independent consultant, and I think you'd worked across kind of financial services, retail, different sectors. Thinking back to when you started, how would you say the the day to day job, should we say, of an HR practitioner has changed most since you were doing it 10 years or so ago?

D

David D'Souza 03:34

It's really interesting. So I've been in and around this space for probably 20 years now, despite the useful appearance, and I think the heart of what you're trying to do in the job probably hasn't changed massively, or it shouldn't have changed massively. You're trying to help organizations be structured in the right way with the right resources to excel. Part of that is making sure that people are set out to succeed within. What I think has shifted is the means to do that. Some of the external pressures around that, and also some of the expectations that people have of their employer. I think there was a fundamental shift during the pandemic, and people's expectations of what an organization would do for them and why, in many cases, shifted. What's interesting is when you've been around the profession for a long time, you see these shifts almost like it's a pendulum, and we're starting to see, I think, some of the pendulum working its way back. And the key, I think, to the profession is always to find one some balance as a whole, but secondly, for every organization to get that balance right, because it can look profoundly different depending on the sector that you work in, depending on the size of the organization, depending on the challenge and what you're trying to achieve.

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Mervyn Dinnen 04:48

You, when I was doing the research, I came across something that I think you once said about a professional body having to spend more time clearing out the gut than reaching for the stars, which I think is a play on either a song or a movie. I can't remember which one. Does I suppose the the profession itself have that same tension? Is is where is I suppose HR still fixing basics when it should be shaping the agenda maybe?

D

David D'Souza 05:19

I think those two things can't be wholly separated. So the basics really matter. Getting the right people into an organization matters. Skilling those people up matters. Paying them on time and the right amount of money matters. And staying legal matters. And I think there's been a kind of pushback and a narrative around strategic HR and the strategic value the function needs to add. Lots of that is actually tied up in excelling in some things that people regard as basic because quite often they're not basic. There's a complexity and a skill and a craft that goes into those things. That said, the big wins are getting all of those things to fit together, and getting those things to deliver for an organization over time as a strategic one. And I think it's about bringing those things together rather than trading them off or playing them off. And I hear that quite often. You know, we need to get away from this to be doing that. Well, actually, it's still a core part what organizations require is to you know everyone gets grumpy if you don't get paid. That's critical.

M

Mervyn Dinnen 06:24

Yeah.

D

David D'Souza 06:25

But actually, you're probably never you're never going to excel. You're never going to out compete. You're never going to deliver more brilliantly just because people get paid on time. Those building blocks are essential. But I think then it's what you're building on top of that, and the craft and the thought and the nuance that needs to go on to that, they can set apart, I guess, what the profession can.



Mervyn Dinnen 06:48

Okay, your your honest diagnosis is what I I suppose I'd like to know. HR, there has often been talk about kind of credibility with CEOs and senior board level, and I mean, what's your view now? Having been inside it for, I suppose, as we said, last 10 years or 20 years in HR, of credibility with the senior leaders in an organization, is it is it very much now seen as part of the leadership of the business?

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David D'Souza 07:21

I started with I started in retail over 20 years ago, and part of the role of the HR team where I started would have been just coming off the back of having you know responsibility for personnel files and making sure that there was a hairdresser right available to to kind of provide people with support, and there was, you know, on-site massage, that that kind of vibe. The profession's in a profoundly different space now, but what's happened, I think, over the last, let's say, 15 years, let's go with that. Is the profession has started to focus on the value it would like to add, rather than the value that organization needs from it at times, and it's not universal. I think people talk about HR having a problem, HR having a. I know some brilliantly well-regarded HR teams doing absolutely fantastic work. I know you know CEOs that absolutely wholly rely on, but when you start talking about problems in a remote way, as in the function would like you to do this rather than this is how we can solve for the business, I think that provides a genuine challenge for organizations. And as times get tighter and economic situation isn't kind at the moment in any dimension, I think what that invites organizations to do is to evaluate all of the work they're doing, going into this most critical thing that we could be doing, and that's where your positioning and your alignment as your activity needs to be absolutely in harmony with what the organization is trying to do. So I think it's that there are lots of things that the profession does that it might try and justify as because this is the right thing to do, because this is the best practice. Start with the business problem. I remember speaking at a conference years ago on someone asked me about wellbeing, and they said I can't get my senior team concerned about wellbeing. So I said, "Well, what what are they concerned about? Well, what's taking up their time and their bandwidth? And they went, "Are they just so concerned about everyone burning out and leaving that I don't have time to talk to them about? It's it's it's because they'd hooked on a good HR team to do well being. They'd lost sight on actually why would you do that in the first place? What's the organizational benefit to it, and I've seen it appear in a whole range of things. The idea and the concept sitting behind any function isn't to get an organization to adopt what the function would like to do; it's to solve problems for a business, and that's where I think, as I say, that alignment bit is absolutely critical. But I think it is overplayed at times because HR is just-it's a wonderful profession because everyone thinks they can do, and everyone always knows someone related to you that we think they've got an insight into it, and it can't be that hard because all people just so. But when you see it done really well, you see the value that it adds. That should be where the bar is. But we don't get to mark our own homework. We don't get to decide that we're adding value unilaterally. Organizations need to do that and need to invest, and that means that you have to start with the problems that they have, and and you have to start with the challenges that they have, and understanding them from a certain lens. Because okay, so this is how we can help you with that if that's what we're really solving for this is what we can do in the part we play and I think in the organizations where that happens as a natural partnership there's no question of that credibility but some of the arguments that see get played out online some of the things that you know people get frustrated with actually, it's proximity to the business. That that's that's the challenge. That's you know we don't have a right to be there. We have a right to be there if we're helping business move on.

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Mervyn Dinnen 07:21

Okay, now I suppose you know there has to be the obligatory AI question. No, yeah, I suppose AI can yeah is taking over or is able to take over much I suppose of the transactional administrative kind of work, and so what is this the opportunity? You know, is the profession ready for what comes next? So to almost break the you know what what I suppose the basics and actually now begin to maybe do more as you were just kind of indicating.

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David D'Souza 11:08

I think there's a few things that's really important to do when we're talking about AI. I think one is to think about time spans because the future is just any amount of time that's beyond today. So to you know to get really clear when you're thinking as an organization, is this a six month problem, a 18 months problem, a three year problem, and lots of that noise about automation that you know as well as anyone has been true for at least 10 years, the conversation 10 years ago would be we can automate this. Haven't quite got there yet in many dimensions, but it's definitely coming. So, so we need to factor around that. I think there are some really important questions about where you want to keep agency and where you want to keep oversight, and then there are some really important questions about where you add value and what you'll do to free it, because an organization faced with the ability to suddenly do a large swathe of work through technology can either go, okay, so we don't need that work, so we don't need those people, or it can go actually that's freeing us up capacity to do other things. So 20 years ago, you could have spoken to someone in the profession and said, "What would you want to happen with the profession? They go, "Well, if we could automate these things, it would free us up to coach, add support, think strategically, a whole range of good value add things. Now we've got the capability or emergent capability to do some of those things, can't be scared of it. One of the cheap conference tricks I do, so I apologize to anyone who ever has to come and see me speak, is I get the audience to put their hands up if they would happily have AI save them five hours a week, and everyone puts their hands up. When you go 10 hours, and most people get their hand up, by the time you get to 30, people go, "Oh, that's my job. They start getting really nervous, and it's a curve of concern and excitement. And each organization, each professional, needs to work out where they are within that. So probably the one thing you do need to know can be quite confident of is that in five years' time you won't have wanted your skill set to stay the same. So you don't want to have your head in your sand and had sand for this period of time, but equally, it can't be an unholy rush because some of the things we need to do will need to be done with care and restraint and really joined up thinking, and that's where the opportunity is now. Save yourself some time now, but to think better about what needs to come next,

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Mervyn Dinnen 14:23

And you know you're known for championing evidence-based practice. I know that because you know you and I have spoken about this many times in the past, and now we've mentioned AI. As I suppose you know, AI does a lot of the work you were just saying are evidence? Would you say evidence and judgment now become the most valuable skills that an HR leader can have?

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David D'Souza 14:52

Yeah, and it's really interesting thinking about where that might play out, and it's interesting thinking about how we acquire knowledge and how we are certainly not, or as close as can be. So, for anyone who hasn't had a solution and hallucination provided to them confidently by AI at this point, I would say that you're just not using it at all, or you're not pushing it hard enough. If you haven't, it is very comfortable giving answers confidently that are incorrect, as will be many of your colleagues if you work in an organization. Right, it's not any different to that. You have to have a sense for what is correct or not, and that comes with experience. But the other way it comes is through checking different academic sources. So what do we know about this, or what's likely to be true about this? Sources of organizational data and sources of feedback from other people. So I talk a lot about the smelt test, and there's a skill that you pick up over the years through experience, where you look at something and you go, that doesn't feel quite right, and that is probably more important than ever because as people increase the volume of work that's getting done, and the assumptions that are that that work is based on, the ability to go back and go, but but actually, is this true? Have we taken enough time to find out that putting our resources in that place is the best way of utilized is really key. I think what worries me about this technology is where we start using it as an evidential basis without understanding the source ourselves, and that's a real challenge because it will happily lie. We moved house a few years back and had a wonderful-I won't name the company-but one of the popular AI solutions, I asked it to do some research on the house that we moved into, and it said it couldn't do that without going into the local museum, and that would take some time. So I said some time has now passed, and it went, oh yeah, I went down to the museum last week. I had a chat to the person working there, dug out some files, and this is the thing that's true, patently made up, patently untrue. In the same way that I've asked for a bio of myself and I've gained an extra two kids that I'm unaware of. Those hallucinations will go down over time. Accuracy will go up, but you still need the experience to do a couple of things. One, make judgment. To your point, situational judgment is at the core of these jobs. There are lots of things you can normally do. It's not like accountancy, where for the most part there are some rules you are expected to follow. There are some rules, but they're also jumping-off points that come with complexity of dealing with human beings that work in complex systems. So it's that, but it's also we've got a role I think to have time to pause and check and go. Actually, that that piece of law is quoting quite happily doesn't exist, and we've already seen that play out in a few court cases where people have quoted statutes that don't exist. The profession has a bank of expertise and equality of situational judgment that it needs to safeguard, because if it doesn't, the losers will be organizations. Let alone the profession itself, the losers will be organizations.

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Mervyn Dinnen 18:13

So, what what capabilities do you think that HR will need in the future that is is possibly not even building at the moment?

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David D'Souza 18:23

So all of the things I've just said there about the importance of what we do and not becoming overly dependent on technology, there is still a lag and a gap in terms of adoption, and I think there's a degree of fear at times, and that fear is really unhelpful. It's we have to have curiosity and we have to have understanding. And once you've got that understanding, you can quantify the risk that sits in there. But I still see too many people asking really big questions, which in some ways are healthy, but probably not pertinent to the workplace. And it will not be the version of Microsoft Copilot that you're using in the office that takes over the missile silos. If that's if that's what's going to happen, the end of an extension of humanity will not come from you attempting to create a document a bit faster. So I think we've got to walk towards that, and I think that's a really different skill set because it's an integration of technology into workflows with challenges and with heightened awareness that it's really important to keep your brain switched on. So there's a chap called Tom Chatfield. I recommend anyone kind of check out his work. He used to talk about the sat nav problem, which is that every so often you'll see someone who's driven into a river because their sat nav told them to, or someone who's driven a really large vehicle through like into a gap that it clearly won't go because their sat nav told them to. It's because we default to the technology. It's not an argument against sat labs. They are inherently useful, but will occasionally make mistakes. Our job is to make sure that actually we are alive enough to the situation that we remain driving and in control and with high agency, rather than just going through the top to dig up. Because at that point, we are purely functional in a process, and there's no value in that. The value comes in to your point, the judgment, the integration. I also think we are theoretically the experts at understanding complex systems, how you motivate people, how you get the best out of people, and how you get those human connections working. Like that has to be absolutely the prime of organizations' thoughts about the challenges that they face. Whether you have a big workforce or a small workforce, what matters is those people can work really well together, work really effectively together, and work in tandem to shape what happens next and how you perform now. I think that is something that is very difficult to outsource to technology. If you if you know if you put those two people together, that program of work is never going to succeed. That is something that it's going to be really difficult for us to reach that level of understanding with and through technology, and that's absolutely an opportunity for me to be used.

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Mervyn Dinnen 21:19

So, I mean, for somebody entering the HR profession today, starting their career, what what might they be able to achieve that that hasn't been achieved so far? Because we're we're talking around things like AI. We're talking about yeah. One of the things I wrote about a couple of years ago was about maintaining humanity in an AI world, and so what? What do you think? What would your advice be to people entering the profession now?

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David D'Souza 21:49

I think my advice is, and I have spoken to quite a few students about it. Think about the things that will make you stand out. So, if it's going to be a more challenging marketplace, and it's potentially going to be changing multiple times over someone's career, the speed of change and the ability to adapt will come with an absolute importance. That I think it's always been there, but I think it's going to be far more important now. So I can't guess what the landscape will look like in five years' time, or I can guess, but I'm probably going to be wrong. If you can't even plan five years out, it's hard to plan a whole career arc. But if what you can say, like in five years' time, it's probably going to be different in quite a pronounced way. Organizations will be going through significant change. The role of practitioners will probably change, and it will probably involve more technology in some ways, but also involve using that, you know, having behavioral science knowledge in others, and we need to understand better what organizations try to succeed at, and make sure we're moving at the pace they are, which I think is greater than it has been before. That gives you a template to think about what you should be doing on you know what you should be reviewing on a regular basis, how often you might need to change direction or course correct in terms of your career, and I think it's that. I think it's less of you always need a plan, but I think you need to be more capable of and aware of the need to change that plan than probably at any point in in recent history.

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Mervyn Dinnen 23:29

And of course, I think as anything gets a little bit more automated, as we know through history, it's kind of you know entry level gets squeezed, and and I suppose one of the thoughts is how does the profession develop future leaders with what we're seeing at the moment? Again, with AI, with with what's being automated, is it about having to develop judgment, or is it something more? Do you think?

D

David D'Souza 23:58

I think it's about judgment. I think that's a key key part. I think it's about relationships and trust. Could you spoke about credibility earlier at a a very structural level? You know, trust in the profession, but actually, lots of that credibility is you know one to you know one to a few people in an organization that are absolutely critical. That's the bit that matters in terms of that trust. I think. I think over the next few years, the amount of change the profession will see will mirror the amount of change that we see in organizations. I was listening to the co-founder of DeepMind speak the other day, and he said a couple of things that I think are really interesting, and you can check out the conversation actually on the Royal Society of Arts website on the YouTube channel. In conversation with Hannah Fry, who's absolutely brilliant, but he said a couple of things. One, if you are prepared to predict what's happening next, you are either lying or you have a vested interest in what. Happens next, so he kind of said, "Look, take that to one side. It's really difficult to know how this plays out. But he said it will predictively. He said it will be the size of what happened in the industrial revolution, but potentially in a tent at the time. That's the level of shift and change that we might see. And for anyone who follows AI developments. It's really weird because if you every week there is something new coming out, and at some point you can almost switch off from that. But it does mean that if you don't look at this technology for six months, you will have a really false view actually for its potentials because it keeps on iterating. I think the profession itself will face the same challenges that almost any other profession does, which is a rapid restructuring of work, a rapid restructuring of organizations, and a lack of clarity as to what the right answer is. So something like strategic workforce planning, where organizations would sit down and go, "What do we need for the next five years? becomes incredibly difficult when your inputs into that are, or your variables are both people and technology, and technology is moving at a furious pace because it means the assumptions that you put in three months ago might not be correct now. So I think that's one of the areas that profession will need to focus on: is how do you keep on coming back to that planet? I mean, this is the right formula for us, as well as we know. But I think the other thing that everyone needs to do throughout their career, and potentially for the next generation of leadership even more, is there's a degree of humility that is absolutely essential when everything is changing, because you could have been right, could have been right last week, and your assumptions are no longer right this week. And the ability to, with humility, go, no, it's changed. So we have to change. I think is absolutely critical for organizations, and therefore for anyone leading, thinking around people and technology.

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Mervyn Dinnen 26:59

So, what do you see looking forward? What do you see as the biggest, I suppose, commercial opportunities for HR inside organizations? And are there are there any problems that are still going unsolved? I mean, I know I can't help but notice online there are a few trains of sort regarding things like DEI and B and how that's been adopted, but what what do you think in terms of I say building people focused businesses? The future holds.

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David D'Souza 27:33

I think some of it is where we started this conversation. Actually, I think the opportunity is there to look at organizations going through profound change, and go look. We can provide all of the elements that you need to understand how this works in terms of technology. So, if where you want to take your organization is from here to there, and that's what that opportunity looks. This part of the organization, these people with this expertise are the ones that you need to solve those problems. For anyone old enough to remember Jack Welch, who used to run GE, going back 30 years, he used to talk about HR being an organisation's killer app. Used to talk about People Factory. That language is out of date, but actually, there's something pure at heart about which is successful businesses understand that people are the people making decisions each day, delivering for them each day, and shaping what that organization will be in the future. Even if you automate a large chunk of what you're doing, all it does is it places even more emphasis on the decisions that you're making day to day, even more emphasis on you know, if you have 20,000 people working for you, you can have 500 people not doing a great job, and that's not great. That's not the end of the world. If you have 10 people, and five people aren't doing a great job, your organisation's failing, and that's why I think people are as critical, if not more critical than ever, as organizations become swifter, as challenges become more pronounced. That's the commercial opportunity for the professionals to realize that it's at the heart of that, but it has to move at the speed of the external market is and that organizations want it. And I think the days of here's our five year plan are well behind us. You need the north star that you're going to try and get to over time, but the focus actually needs to be how quickly can we match and shift now. And I think one of the challenges around AI is that HR can't be the point of resistance for that. It can be an informed member of the conversations in organizations around it, and it can take a lead with it. But if it's HR just going, we're not comfortable with it. We lock ourselves out of a conversation that's critical, actually, to the heart of success in most organizations, and that's where it has to be front foot step, well informed, but with a degree of understanding of the ethical challenges that sit around it. So it's not going home. We can't let the opportunity blind us to the risk, and we can't let the risk blind us to the opportunity. The challenge sits in reconciling those two things.

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Mervyn Dinnen 30:20

Now, although I know you, I was doing a bit of background research, and I came across something. I'm not 100% sure how long ago, but it was, I think, a CRPD event or a branch event, and you asked an audience what what their future selves in five years' time would want them to be doing now. So I suppose I'm going to turn that on you now. So what what do you or what do you think the profession should be doing today that maybe it isn't or five years time would think why weren't we doing that?

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David D'Souza 30:55

I think I've been around the profession for a long time. There's I won't say navel gazing. I think people have used the term navel gazing too often, but I think there's a there's a lot of talk at times online about things that in five years' time will have no value. Those conversations will be in the rearview mirror, and we don't pick the really important things to go at, or people get distracted by other things. It's probably easier than ever to get distracted by other things. Five years time, you're gonna you're gonna want it now to be getting really clear on the unique strengths and capabilities that you can bring into a situation or to your career. Understand where there might be a gap between what organizations might need and where you are, and you want to be filling those gaps systematically, and working out how you can be really on the front foot in terms of technologies for a profession that actually is genuinely lagged for the most part, and people who are really good in that space, I think what's brilliant is they stand out really well because you see them doing things that are novel or interesting or finding ways to experiment, and that's going to be the future of this. It won't be everything you need to know now that would help you now and help you going forward hasn't been invented yet or understood yet or thought through you, chunks of it will be, and that's where I think we don't always need to be inventing something new. So really good examples, you know, pandemic and lockdown. You had lots of organizations going, "How on earth would we do remote working? IBM would have been doing it for 30 years, so maybe you just need to look across and look there, and then make it right for your context. Don't just lift and drop. Lots of people have been thinking around ethical guidelines and regulatory frameworks for AI for decades. I was chatting to one about this the other day. If you go back to Isaac Asimov's works, I think 1940s, 1950s, you've got this is how this technology should work. These are where you need safeguards. These are how you need to think about the hierarchy of challenges that you put in. And we've got lots of this information available to us now, but it won't have been thought through for the future context. So there's some hard thinking work and reflection work for anyone to do, but that's really different to I checked out my LinkedIn feed for an hour today, kind of drifted away with the noise. It's going right. Okay, what's what's the depth of understanding that I need about this topic to be able to make some considered judgments on it, and who might I go to in a mindful way for that? And that's probably, if you think about how your feed is generated, the average person's feed generated, probably steering away actually from some of the more dramatic voices, and looking at people who are approaching things with a degree of thoughtfulness and nuance that I think is not as attractive as a headline grabber, but yeah, probably is really what you need for your practice and your understanding.

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Mervyn Dinnen 34:07

So we we are wrapping up now. So I suppose my final question would be, what do you see? I suppose over the over the next five years, we always say over the next five years or something. What's the biggest challenge, do you think for the HR profession?

D

David D'Souza 34:24

I think it has to be on the front foot solving these challenges, or it will be left out of them. So it's not going to be any harder than that. If we're the only people in a room going, no, you can't do this, or you shouldn't do this, or go slower, but the organization needs it to still exist. You can guarantee which way most organizations will exist, and that's not about us not having principles and not understanding what's going on or setting restraints. It's about us making sure that we're in the heart of those conversations and we're helping move them forward in the right way. I think that's the biggest challenge over the next five years. Organizations will go. Through a period of immense change in many sectors, the way that we interact with technology will fundamentally change. On a personal level, people need to keep up with that. On an organizational level, this is a real challenge for the profession not to be not to think we're paid to be blockers. We're paid to find ways to best enable, and that has to be at the heart of helping organizations succeed. So I think it's done. Next five years is everything is chaos. So how do we find the best way of applying skills, knowledge, and expertise to picking the right path through that, or the path that is most likely to be right, and I'll come back to that point around humility as well. Genuinely an underrated capability to just go, I was wrong on that.

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Mervyn Dinnen 35:50

Okay, David, it's been an absolute pleasure. If anybody listening wants to know how to connect with you or reach out to you, what's what's the best way?

D

David D'Souza 35:58

Find me on LinkedIn and and say hello. And if you're in the London area, I'm hanging out at the Royal Society of Arts a few days a week, and I'm normally up for an interesting coffee with an interesting.

M

Mervyn Dinnen 36:10

David, it's been an absolute pleasure. Thank you very much.

D

David D'Souza 36:14

Thank you.