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SPEAKERS

Mervyn Dinnen

M Mervyn Dinnen 00:09

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M Mervyn Dinnen 01:03

Welcome to the HR Means Business podcast, which is part of the HR Happy Hour Network. I'm your host Mervyn Dinnen. Today is a slightly different kind of episode. I don't have a guest; it's just me and a few threads and thoughts from recent conversations that I think belong together. Recent weeks there have been a number of events looking to the future: the HR technology conference and expo in Las Vegas, Unleash World in Paris. A number of the HR tech vendors have been holding analyst days, and I want to look at some of the key trends and learnings. I guess I'll cover four things. First, where I think HR technology is heading. Second, how AI is changing work and landing differently with different generations. Third, what it means for entry-level roles. And fourth, the question underneath all of it. I guess how do people learn what they need to know when the traditional learning ground is disappearing, I'm not going to pretend that there are nice, neat answers. But I think we can ask better questions than most of the headlines do.

M Mervyn Dinnen 02:10

So let's get into it, starting with the technology, because there is a lot of noise, and I suppose the clearest pattern I'm seeing is that HR leaders don't want more tools. Embedded beats stand alone. They want the tools they already have to be better. Recent session that I sat through looking at particularly AI and recognition. The point that stuck was that HR leaders aren't asking for another AI product. They want AI inside the systems their people already use. In an example using IBM, a simple writing assistant embedded in an existing recognition platform, drove a 20% increase in daily recognition in an already mature program. The technology wasn't dazzling, but it was placed where people already were, and that's why it worked. Conversational interfaces to HR systems are also important. The same session I just referenced covered IBM's internal Ask HR Assistant. It gives employees, managers, and HR professionals a conversational way into systems like SAP SuccessFactors, for example. Employees can ask about pay, promotion, history, time off in plain language, and they don't have to book a meeting or file a ticket. IBM reported more than 10 million interactions a year. The shift is from HR systems you navigate to HR systems you talk to, and over the next couple of years, I expect that to become the the default offering, and I suppose that leads me on to my next trend, which is from from AI that that answers to AI that acts, and I think it's quite clear we're moving from chatbots to agents, AI that that doesn't just respond but actually takes action, monitors things, works proactively. A recent keynote I was at, the speaker described using agents as a watchdog over the workforce planning channels, flagging anything that drifted from the vision. That's an early look at where HR operations could go. And I think the fourth trend I've noticed probably matters the most, and that's the the gap between adoption and governance. Certainly, Deloitte's 2026 Human Capital Trends research found 60% of executives using AI in decision making, but only 5% said that they manage it well. That's what Deloitte calls the culture debt. We're scaling the technology faster than the accountability, the trust, and the decision rights around it. Another stat from that keynote also made me sit up, shall we say? In roughly 60% of cases, HR isn't even in the room when AI strategy is being written. That's a problem, I think, because the hardest parts of AI adoption aren't technical. They're about the people, and that's where I want to go next.

M Mervyn Dinnen 05:04

Regular listeners to my podcast will know that I recently had a conversation with Nick Holmes, who's researching organizational culture. He made a point that's become a bit of a lens for me. We keep asking what AI is doing to our culture, but the better question is probably whether our culture is ready for AI at all. The tool is the same everywhere. What difference is the environment it lands in? And there are three things I think we're underestimating. First, AI is often increasing workloads, not reducing it. Nick pointed to research suggesting that many employees feel AI is added to their workload. Its explanation was simple: we use AI to do things faster, but rarely stop doing the underlying things. So work accelerates, and more gets added. The organizations who who get real value ask a different question. I guess not what can we do faster, but what can we stop doing entirely? Familiarity also isn't understanding, and Nick used the analogy of a zip. Everyone can use a zip, but ask somebody how it works, and confidence is a bit lower. AI widens that gap. You can ask a chatbot about a topic and feel informed, but ask a follow-up question tomorrow, and you may find you took nothing in. Now, interestingly enough, Danielle Farage, who you've probably seen me speak to, and certainly on our From X to Z podcast, did research with 1000 Gen Z professionals that pointed the same thing. She found that nearly two thirds deliberately protect certain skills from AI. Their caution isn't being behind; they're drawing lines, and I think that's a sophisticated way to use the tools. Third thing, I think there's a trust problem that's probably hiding in plain sight. The Workplace Intelligence Report found that 29% of employees admit to actively undermining employers' AI strategy, and that rose to 44% amongst Gen Z. I mean, that's sabotage. That's not resistance. It usually comes from fear about job security set against a background of continuous low-level layoffs. Maybe if your AI strategy depends on people who are quietly working against it, no amount of fixes can can fix that. It's a trust issue, which brings me on to I suppose the third point, which is the the generational lens. You know, let's bring generations into this because the same technology lands very differently depending on who you are.

M Mervyn Dinnen 07:40

Recent research I've seen from Ositana offered a useful way to think about it: the generational contract. Each generation entered work with a set of unspoken expectations, shaped by the conditions they started in. So you know, I don't think I'm saying anything groundbreaking if I say you know boomers tended to enter during post-war posterity, where it was a case of loyalty for job security. Gen X entered during downsizing and learned that skills, not tenure, would protect them. You know, competence for autonomy, shall we say? The millennials arrived with high ideals, meaning for commitment, and Gen Z are hyper connected, but often short on that depth of that connection, and they want inclusion for engagement. Now, looking applying AI to that, you know, Gen X built their security on expertise. So for them, AI is a question about whether their their hard won skills still count and recognition of their expertise matters more than ever now. Millennials are the heaviest AI users in many of the workplaces, from what I've seen, but they'll push hard on whether their organisation's use of AI matches its stated organizational values. Gen Z is a little bit more interesting. The assumption is that they're the AI native generation and will embrace it, but the data says it's a bit more of a complicated relationship. They're most likely to sabotage it. Danielle's research most of of the that I quoted just now. Most of the participants were not enthusiastic adopters. They understand the technology well enough to see what it might do to their prospects, and there's a real worry underneath that, which I'll come to in a moment. I guess the point for HR leaders is that a single AI communication strategy will land differently across all of these groups. Generational friction isn't random; it's predictable because each group is reading the same change through a different lens, a different contract. If you understand the contracts, you can design for them.

M Mervyn Dinnen 09:43

But only about a quarter of employees in the research I referenced earlier experienced what was called generational synergy, working across generations to produce better outcomes than any would alone. AI could widen that gap, or could. Help to close it, depending on how we handle it. And I guess one of the things that that people are concerned about is entry level roles and learning. And this is the part that that kind of yeah we need to get right. The pipeline is thinning. When I spoke to economist Julius Probst from AppCast earlier in the year on the HR Means Business podcast, he described what's happening in the data. Graduate hiring has fallen substantially. AI currently complements experienced workers who bring judgment and context to it, whilst companies cut back on entry-level hiring to save cost. Routine white-collar tasks, the kind that used to be the first rung of the ladder are exactly where displacement is showing up. On top of that, Nick Holmes described that what AI screening is doing to early careers. Employers get overwhelmed by applications, and genuine candidates get little or no feedback. They lose the energy to try again. But I guess this there's a deeper issue. Entry-level work was never just about output. It was where people learned. You drafted the report badly. Someone more experienced marked it up and showed you how it could be better. And slowly, you built your judgment. If I, if AI does that first layer of work, where does that learning happen? I think that's a big concern for most of us. At a recent keynote, the speaker named this as probably one of the biggest risks in AI adoption: over reliance. She said that if Gen Z don't get the chance to struggle through basic tasks and work alongside experienced colleagues, in 10-15 years, we'll have nobody with good enough experience to judge whether AI's output is is is any good or correct, and the research on learning supports that using AI to do the thing erodes your learning of it. Using AI to help you do something, to teach you, challenge you, and question you can lift performance and understanding. So her words in the keynote were "Partner, don't substitute," and I think that that makes a lot of sense to me.

M Mervyn Dinnen 12:08

So what can organizations actually do? And I guess there's there's there's four practical ideas. The first one I would say is protect time to struggle, build in tasks that early career people complete themselves first, then compare it against AI. The aim is to develop judgment, not to be slower for the sake of it. Secondly, I guess pair across generations deliberately. Reciprocal mentoring works. It works because both sides have something real to give. A Gen Z colleague may be quicker with the tools. Their Gen X colleague has the decades of judgment to tell whether the output is right. Neither is really complete without the other. I think the third thing is something people are beginning to do a lot more, and that's using AI as a coach, not a ghost writer. I heard a good example from a retailer presenting at one of the recent conferences about using an AI coach inside their recognition platform. It doesn't just write messages; it gives feedback on what the person wrote. So people learn to do it better in their own voice. They learn to develop that voice, and they also learn how to maybe express things in in in a better a more precise way, and of course the big thing is to kind of don't stop hiring juniors. I've I've heard this a lot. Entry level roles are drying up. People are finding it harder to get them. Going back to my chat with Julius Prots from Upcast. He made a point that has stuck with me right across the year, and that's large cohorts of experienced workers will be retiring in the next three to five years. Now I know every day we read online about people who want to work on into their 60s, their 70s, and even their 80s, but in the main, large cohorts of experienced workers will be retiring if you stop building the junior pipeline and that knowledge pipeline. The gap won't appear gradually. It will suddenly become a gap, possibly a chasm. So, pulling these threads together, I guess you know in HR technology, the winning approach is embedded, conversational.

M Mervyn Dinnen 14:19

It's increasingly agentic, but adoption is outrunning governance, and HR needs to be in the room. In the world of work, AI's impact depends on the culture it lands in. Where trust is low, you're going to get sabotage and cognitive overload. Where trust is high, you're going to get leverage and you're going to get results. Across the generations, the same technology is read through very different contracts. So, understanding those contracts is how you could move from friction to synergy. For early career talent, the central question isn't whether AI can do the junior work; it's how we keep people learning when it can. The organizations that answer that well. Have the experienced leaders of 2040. The ones that don't will wonder where the leaders went. As always, I'd love to hear what you're seeing. Are you protecting entry-level learning in your organization, or is it quietly disappearing? Let me know on LinkedIn. Thank you for listening to HR Means Business, and I look forward to seeing you next time.