

Meghan Ambiro: On this week's episode of Work Trends we're looking ahead at UNLEASH America. This is a pretty cool event that exports the bridge between work and technology, stay tuned for my conversation with China Gorman.

Meghan Ambiro: Welcome to the Work Trends podcast from Talent Culture. I'm your host, Meghan Ambiro. Every week we interview interesting [00:00:30] people who are re-imagining work, and join us on Twitter every Wednesday, 1:30 PM Eastern using the hashtag Work Trends. I am so excited, I have on of my BFF's here today with me, Ms. China Gorman, who is the managing director of UNLEASH America. She is a board member of the HR Certification Institute and a former CEO of Great Place to Work Institute, [00:01:00] and yes, it continues, and a former COO of SHRM. Welcome to Work Trends, China.

China Gorman: Yay, thanks. It's so good to be with you again.

Meghan Ambiro: I know. We're never too far from one another, that's the nice part.

China Gorman: Anywhere in the world though, I remember some of our trips where we ended up at the same place because of industry events in London and other places and actually it probably seems like we're together more outside the US [00:01:30] than inside the US.

Meghan Ambiro: I know. I mean ... Actually Work Trends audience, China and I have probably known each other, I'm scared to say, I think for about nine, 10 years now.

China Gorman: Yeah.

Meghan Ambiro: Yeah? It's been awhile. So listen, where are you today? Speaking of all this global travel.

China Gorman: I am in my home office in Las Vegas, Nevada. It's beautiful, blue sky, light breeze, it's going to be 85 today.

Meghan Ambiro: I'm so jealous, nice.

China Gorman: Well [00:02:00] it's mid-April as we record this, so it'll be a lot warmer than your audience hears.

Meghan Ambiro: Well it's just going to keep getting hotter and hotter. So listen, I'm excited to see you, I mean we're now weeks away from UNLEASH America, which is in your hometown of Las Vegas later this month, and the theme is the bridge between work and technology. Talk to us about some of the big ideas you're excited to explore on this front.

China Gorman: [00:02:30] Well, when we think globally, privacy, data privacy is looming large with the onset of GDPR. Impacting organizations that have employees all over the world and different standards of what's private and what's not, what's available and what's not. Employee and individual data privacy I think is a top issue and is going to continue to be a top issue, and that's one of [00:03:00] the areas we're going to explore at UNLEASH America on the 14th and 15th of May in Las Vegas.

Meghan Ambiro: That's because we all have devices and we're all collaborating, right?

China Gorman: Well, and the admin of blockchain where people can ... Where individuals can own their data in a new kind of way and share it in a new kind of way is going to impact this whole employee data privacy arena in a really interesting way and I'm aware [00:03:30] of a number of organizations that are starting up to help organizations. Non-profits, for profits, to help individuals own their data, collect it, so that they can disseminate it in new kinds of ways as they're applying for jobs or applying for certification or applying for schools or educational experiences. This is really going to have a huge impact on how employers find out about potential employees, how they interact [00:04:00] with current employees and what they can share and what they can't and ultimately what we need to wrestle to the ground is, who owns employee data?

Meghan Ambiro: Oh, and wrestle to the ground we are going to do, because you're absolutely right, and it's not cut and dry. This is not black and white, this is very fuzzy, this is very gray and I think we are going to be a number of months and years away from actually ... Well, I'll use the word solving this question, but at least we're [00:04:30] working on it, right?

China Gorman: Well, we are, and like many new technological breakthroughs, it's going to take us awhile to figure it out and we're going to make mistakes along the way. And so I think we all have to just sort of recognize that employers and employees, that it's not going to be perfect. There is no perfect answer, and whatever we start with is not going to be the end point.

Meghan Ambiro: Well, listen, tell me about all the speakers. I know you [00:05:00] and the team have put a lot of work into curating the voices, the personas, the people, that the humans, right? That are going to be at this conference. I know I'm thrilled, I'm going to be moderating a panel there-

China Gorman: I'm excited about that.

Meghan Ambiro: ... with a bunch of people, which I'm excited. But tell us more about it, just the event itself and some of the speakers.

China Gorman: Well, UNLEASH is a new kind of professional development experience, designed for very senior level folks in HR [00:05:30] but in other functions as well. We call

it UNLEASH because our focus is on unleashing the power of your people, and so while our roots are in HR technology, and when you talk to employers of all sizes, HR technology really does help employers know who they have, know what skills they've got, know how to communicate with them, track their progress, deliver services. HR technology [00:06:00] is a big piece now of the employee experience, and in many ways it's trying to be the glue, part of the glue, that binds the employee and the employer.

China Gorman: But unleashing the power of your people is about more than just HR technology, that's our roots, but we're looking at the big issues. We're looking around the corners and over the horizon so that senior leaders who are making decisions about how do we unleash the power of our [00:06:30] people, and that's not just HR, that's technology, that's finance, that's marketing, that's technology, all of those functions. Those senior level people are involved with unleashing the power of the people that work in their organization, or have some kind of work relationship with their organization. And so we're bringing controversial in some cases, thought provoking, cutting edge speakers from academia. Thought [00:07:00] leaders in different disciplines, surprising speakers, and then mostly practitioners. CHRO's, CTO's, heads of employer brand, he's of talent acquisition, who are all talking, thinking, experimenting, and implementing really 21st century approaches to binding the people who work for them with whatever kind of relationship that is. Whether that's employee or something else, [00:07:30] but bind them more closely together so that they are in alignment and that the relationship role will persist.

China Gorman: So we have some great speakers this year. Esther Perel, she's a therapist and a best selling author and she talks about how do you be a real person in the real world. She's very inspirational and comes at things from a very personal perspective, so as a therapist, right? She works with organizations a lot about the employer, [00:08:00] employee relationship and how does that dynamic work and how do you make workplaces friendly for human resources, right? Peter Hinssen, co-founder and partner at nexxworks is a leading future thinker about work, just a really great speaker who brings really interesting, interesting insights and we have John Boudreau, management professor at USC. And then we have a very controversial speaker, our [00:08:30] last keynote speaker, because really we're just talking about data privacy and who owns what and how does that work. We've got Edward Snowden-

Meghan Ambiro: Whoa.

China Gorman: ... being beamed in from Moscow. And so he's going to talk more sort of big picture about data privacy, sort of his experience, not so much politically, but ... So how do we who owns what, how do we work so that people can control what they need to control in terms of [00:09:00] data. Obviously he made some decisions that were very controversial and in fact most people believe illegal around data privacy, and so that's going to be a whole fresh different take that

should sort of spur the thinking and create some interesting juices for our [inaudible 00:09:19] attendees to marinate in as they-

Meghan Ambiro: Marinate, and there might even be some fist fights, you never know.

China Gorman: Well, I'm hoping not fist [00:09:30] fights. I really ... But it would be hard to get in a fist fight with him because he's going to be in Moscow being beamed in.

Meghan Ambiro: See?

China Gorman: So-

Meghan Ambiro: So we're beaming him in, Scotty, and that's awesome.

China Gorman: Exactly.

Meghan Ambiro: That's good stuff.

China Gorman: And we've had people like Kathryn Minshew who's the founder and CEO of The Muse. Sue Marks, the CEO and founder of Cielo. We've got Patti Fletcher, formerly super high level HR person in the HR tech space, now author and speaker. [00:10:00] We've got Mike Ettling, we've got David Green, we've got Katherine Jones, Lara Schmidt. I mean plus analysts, but I was just going through what we've got posted on the website and right now we have 75 speakers posted and 34 of them are women. And if you look at that website you will-

Meghan Ambiro: Yay.

China Gorman: Yay. You will see a pretty diverse group of speakers and I would position more diverse than any other sort of event, live event, in our space.

Meghan Ambiro: [00:10:30] I like that you're mixing it up with controversial because that's the reality of what we're all experiencing, come on. Let's keep it real, I love it.

China Gorman: Absolutely, absolutely, and we have ... As business leaders, who are making decisions about how do we select people, how do we get them on board, how do we keep them, how do we develop them, how do we deploy them? So the most senior people need to know the other things that are going on in related spaces, right? And so things like Edward [00:11:00] Snowden, which is not an employee data issue at all, but it was a data theft issue, and so what happens as a result of that could very well impact what's happening as employees join companies with data from other employers, leave company with data. But just think also about the background checking business, now full disclosure I'm on the corporate board of a background checking company, but think about what things like GDPR, blockchain ownership [00:11:30] of your own data, and

Edward Snowden. Put those in a blender and think, now what does this mean for the background checking business, right?

Meghan Ambiro: Good stuff.

China Gorman: So we're going to have some fascinating conversations. The other thing I would say about UNLEASH is this is about bringing to senior decision makers nuggets, inspiration, questions that you might not know the answer to, so [00:12:00] that over two days you come away with new ways of thinking, new questions to ask that you might never have asked before. So here are areas where new things are happening that I need to continue to learn about and be invested from a mental perspective, and so to do that the people that we have speak, except for the big headliners, they speak for 25 or 30 minutes. These aren't death by PowerPoint presentations, [00:12:30] these are significant business leaders, thought leaders, academic leaders, practitioners, entrepreneurs bringing the most interesting, the most impactful and the most cutting edge questions, some with answers, but more with background so that you get lots and lots of data points, lots and lots of different perspectives from the speakers, right? [00:13:00] From the content piece.

China Gorman: And then when you go to the expo and you see all the startups alongside the vendors who you would expect to see. The SAP SuccessFactors, the IBM's, the Ultimate's, the sumtotal's, the Cielo's, the SmartRecruiters, the LinkedIn's. When you go out and you see all of those, who almost all of those were startups sort of at one point and not too far in the distant past, and you see some of these fascinating, [00:13:30] fascinating startups who are competing to be the startup of the year at the show, but one of the differences of the UNLEASH live event is the focus on really supporting startups in the broader ... I'm not even going to call it HR tech, I'm going to call it people effectiveness tech, right? Organizations and people effectiveness tech.

Meghan Ambiro: China, you just dropped a new phrase for us. That's kind of sexy, I like it. You just made [00:14:00] that up, didn't you? I was just going to say that.

China Gorman: I did, I did.

Meghan Ambiro: So, listen, I want to do some quickfire Q&A with you. You and I have been around this space long enough to be dangerous, you and I have thrown around a lot of buzzwords in big themes about the future of work in the last decade, okay? So I'm going to ... You and I are going to play a little game with each other. You're going to tell me ... I'm going to just name a name or name a phrase and you're going to tell me how the conversation is changing around [00:14:30] that theme. AI and robotics.

China Gorman: As it relates to people effectiveness in organizations I think the jury's out, but I would say that the sub-function that is making the most inroads on actually having useful, impactful AI is the talent acquisition space-

Meghan Ambiro: Why?

China Gorman: ... by leaps and bounds. Because they are [00:15:00] just a whole ... You look at little startups like Pocket Recruiter that are driving human process time out of the recruiting process that are increasing the number of qualified candidates by a huge factor so that you can get from posting a job description to actual interviews in a very short period of time. Driving tons of process costs out and increasing the effectiveness of hire, and as you're doing [00:15:30] that the system is learning what's working for your organization so that the next search is going to be even faster and with even better results. So that's just one example, but they evolved in the talent acquisition space and so I think they're going to lead the rest of HR in terms of the effective use of AI.

Meghan Ambiro: And we don't want to be afraid of these technologies. Everyone out there, you Work Trends listeners, remember it's about keeping you more human. At the end of this process when you [00:16:00] purchase a piece of technology it's not going to replace you as a human, and I think that's an important theme that we're also going to see at the event.

China Gorman: We absolutely are. The humanity of our workforce is actually ... HR technology, AI inside HR technology are letting us be ... Have more substantial and wider ranging human relationships with our colleagues, [00:16:30] I should say with our organization members. Whether they are full time employees, part time employees, contractors, gig workers, customers, owners, suppliers, that's just seven, right? Different kinds of different groups of human beings that we interact with in our organizations and so to the degree that AI enhanced technology lets us focus more on the human relationship [00:17:00] rather than the tactical process relationship between people, that's where we're headed.

Meghan Ambiro: Employee experience.

China Gorman: So-

Meghan Ambiro: She took a sigh everyone, she took a moment.

China Gorman: So to me that's the essence of HR, right? And HR should be that all day long all the time, and because we are bogged down in legalities, governmental regulations [00:17:30] at the local, county, state, national level I think in many organizations, big and small, long term and startup, that HR frequently has been reduced to administration costs and not people who are engaged in creating and employee experience that will increase quality, that will increase the quality [00:18:00] of employee experience and that will lengthen the relationship

between the employer and the employee, regardless of what category they're in. And I think in their heart of hearts, that's the business HR wants to be in, and they're sidetracked into time cards and local regulations and what's congress doing now or what's the EU doing now?

China Gorman: Or what's being mandated that we ... And so as [00:18:30] we move forward with technology, without technology I really think the strength of organizations [inaudible 00:18:37] is in the relationship between the employer and so that comes down to individual managers, right? And the people they're engaged with who are doing work, whatever category that is. Whether it's employee or gig worker or part time or temp or whatever.

Meghan Ambiro: Is employee engagement going anywhere in this discussion?

China Gorman: The latest Gallup data [00:19:00] says that we're getting better for the first time in a really, really long time. Not much better, not much better, but a little better. There's a tiny little trend improvement, but still the vast majority ... Vast, more than 60% of employees are not engaged or are actively disengaged, right? So the opportunity there is huge to improve engagement, but more than that the opportunity to increase [00:19:30] everything you measure that means success for an organization, whether it's profitability, whether it's turnover, whether it's innovation, whether ... Anything you measure, when employees are engaged, if you want it to go up it'll go up and if you want it to go down it'll go down. I mean it's just that simple and the data's very clear, but if 60%, more than 60% of our employees are either not engaged or actively disengaged, the other way to say that is if only 30% [00:20:00] of our employees are engaged, holy moly, we're ... The bottom line is we're just leaving money on the table, period.

Meghan Ambiro: I love it. I love that it's ... We get down to business with China Gorman today, because that's really ... I mean, right? It's not this warm and fuzzy all the time, it's business. It's driving the future and you have to have an ROI on humans, that's the way work is, that's the reality.

China Gorman: And that's all of what ... That's kind of the bottom line of UNLEASH, whether [00:20:30] you come to Vegas in the US or you go to London in the UK or this fall you go to Paris in France, right? That's what UNLEASH is all about.

Meghan Ambiro: HR tech, talk to us about those two words right now.

China Gorman: I think that's yesterday's [inaudible 00:20:47]. I think what we're talking about is organizational effectiveness. I think what we're talking about is the relationship between people and organizations working together to [00:21:00] become more effective, and technology certainly can help to do that, it can also screw it up big time, but if you do it right and if you select the right partners absolutely it can.

But I think HR tech is limiting, it's siloed, it speaks of barriers, it ... I think that's kind of yesterday's language.

Meghan Ambiro: Makes a lot of sense to me, I like where that's going and we're going to continue to unfold that [00:21:30] over the next months ahead for sure. Talk to us about vendors we should be watching, who's really doing things in an innovative, cutting edge way in your opinion?

China Gorman: So we could talk about big company, we could talk about smaller startups. VideoMyJob from Australia is a great little example of super easy to use video technology for messaging, for recruiting, for [00:22:00] anything that needs to be done in an organization, the right little video clip. Whether you're videoing employees doing it themselves on a really simple ... Really, I've seen it. I mean it's a really super simple app about why I came to work for the ABC tech company and why you should consider it or a message from the CEO about our results last month and go, yay, you team, or anything in-between, right? VideoMyJob is one of those great examples.

China Gorman: [00:22:30] On the larger side, Cielo, one of the ... I think it actually is the largest independent RPO, recruitment process outsourcing firm in the world, founded by Sue Marks, really changing the game in terms of how you do high volume recruitment with that human touch. It's the marriage of the human touch and the AI and the technology, they're doing things in an exquisitely effective way. And so they'll be there and it'll be ... Actually Sue is [00:23:00] going to ... Sue Marks is going to be kind of really on a really interesting panel. There's another little startup that's going to be here called Sift and it's like-

Meghan Ambiro: Oh, yes.

China Gorman: Right? It's the most brilliant ... It's like LinkedIn meets your employee directory so that people at the top of the organization know who they've got, what skills they have, what projects they worked on in this organization and their previous organizations, right on their mobile app and it's just an incredibly useful [00:23:30] piece of software. What's interesting to me about that is that it's an organization wide application but the biggest users are the people at the top, it's extraordinary. So I guess what that means is it works, and it works really, really well. So they'll be there in the startup zone as well, but then we've got ... LinkedIn's going to be there, SAP SuccessFactors, IBM, sumtotal, Ultimate, AppLearn, SmartRecruiters. We've got all kinds of-

Meghan Ambiro: [00:24:00] We've got options. That's the good news everyone, we've got small, we've got medium, and we've got large. Listen, you have been really busy planning these conferences, what's been surprising to you about the process and what's it like to be in your shoes doing a conference of this size?

China Gorman: Well, so UNLEASH is headquartered in Budapest, Hungary. The CEO and founder is an Irish guy who lives in Budapest, Hungary and the [00:24:30] theme in Budapest is this amazing international group of people who are focused on bringing these world class events, and so you go and visit with them or they come to Vegas and it's like being at the UN. They're smart, they each speak 100 languages, so that makes me feel so, so inadequate.

Meghan Ambiro: Right.

China Gorman: So the biggest challenge is the timezone difference for me, because it's nine hours different. So [00:25:00] I'm on the phone at 5:00 a lot, in the morning.

Meghan Ambiro: You're up early.

China Gorman: But it's a sensibility of how do we bring the freshest, most thought provoking, and useful and yes, maybe controversial topics and speakers to the London market? To the Paris market, to the US market in Vegas? And so we're constantly pushing the edge [00:25:30] of the envelope, like I want to see if we could get Edward Snowden. Now, that might be really too controversial, let's ask some people, let's kind of ... Let's socialize and see what we see and I'm going to guess we might have lost two or three attendees.

Meghan Ambiro: There you go, that's your answer.

China Gorman: But for the most part people are like, "Well, that's an unusual choice. I might not have made that choice, but I'm going to be there, and I'll be fascinated to listen," and so we'll [00:26:00] know at the end whether we pushed the edge too far, but so far we're thinking it's pretty interesting. But I would dare say that from a keynote perspective, we don't have the usual suspects, right? And we tend to not go ... We don't go for TV, we don't go to TV and movie stars and that kind of thing because at the end of the day we're really trying to help organizations and people work better together. [00:26:30] And so TV stars are interesting and they drive ticket sales but do they really impact how organizations and people work together better, right? So it's a little bit of a differentiator.

Meghan Ambiro: All right, bringing out the Work Trends crystal ball. Where do you see HR changing in the next five to 10 years and do you have any bold predictions?

China Gorman: Well, so I think we're going to be at an inflection point pretty quickly, particularly because of the rise of AI, [00:27:00] where routine things more and more are being automated, and successfully so. I think in 10 years HR will either be out of business or there will be a hyper-focus on human relations and human relationships with a very specific skillset and a very specific, very strategic spot at the top of the organization that's going to be about ... Because [00:27:30]

we're going to ... We have people who are going to be having to transition from one skillset to another, how are we going to do that?

China Gorman: Well that's going to mean working together with academic providers, employers, and workers. We don't have that now, and we got to get it going, and if HR can't make that happen, the CEO will find somebody who can. So HR is either going to be out of business, which I really don't think is going to be the case, but it could, or [00:28:00] it's going to be transformed into really a human being, a people function, and all of the tactical process stuff that can be automated will be and will go somewhere else, so that what we now call HR will really be about the humans.

Meghan Ambiro: So, if you're out there listening to China and I today we hope you're going to be with us in Vegas because the future is wide open and at the same time it's calling upon [00:28:30] you, each one of you out there, to skill up. And to skill up and take it seriously because I concur with what China's saying, HR does run that risk of being out of business because we got the tools and we need to either wisely adapt and become more scientific in how we analyze data, or I fear we will be left behind. So wise words, China Gorman, thank you for stopping by and I will see you in Vegas.

China Gorman: Yay, thanks, Meghan.

Meghan Ambiro: [00:29:00] Let's keep on talking, join us for our Work Trends Twitter chat. We are going to be on Twitter with China Gorman on Wednesday, May, 8th at 1:30 PM Eastern, 10:30 AM Pacific, and most importantly wherever you are around this great globe join us and talk about how work is changing around you. We want to hear from you and if you'd like to get our Twitter chat questions in advance, sign up for our newsletter [00:29:30] at talentculture.com.

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