

Meghan M. Biro: Let's make the employee experience better. Ready, set, well what are you waiting for out there? Don't worry, we are going to tackle this huge, overwhelming topic of air quote employee experience and point you in the right direction on today's episode with Mary Falkner.

Meghan M. Biro: Welcome to the Work Trends podcast [00:00:30] from TalentCulture. I'm your host, Meghan M. Biro. Every week we interview interesting people who are re-imagining work. Join us on Twitter every Wednesday, 1:30 p.m. eastern, using the hashtag Work Trends. For this episode of Work Trends we've partnered with the Talent Acquisition Exchange to bring you an exclusive Q&A with Southwest Airlines Direct of Talent Acquisition, Greg Muccio.

Meghan M. Biro: Head on over to the Talent Culture website to check it out, and [00:01:00] don't miss the upcoming Talent Acquisition Exchange, where Greg takes the stage alongside Adobe. He's going to be giving you tips from the trenches, which we love, on why providing a great candidate experience is a must have.

Meghan M. Biro: Hello all you savvy Work Trends listeners out there. Today's theme is employee experience, which makes me think about customer experience. The two are completely linked, [00:01:30] I think we all can agree on that, but it's often a lot cooler and more popular to talk about the customer experience. I think that's because customers spend money. Let's get honest everybody, and happy customers spend more.

Meghan M. Biro: I saw a Forrester stat that a good customer experience makes a person five times more likely to recommend a company and more likely to purchase in the future. Forrester says that more than three-fourths of executives say improving customer experience [00:02:00] is a major priority, and a lot of companies have even established a C-level position to oversee customer experience.

Meghan M. Biro: But today we're here to say that the employee experience is just as important. Let's talk to one expert who wants to help us all be better at this.

Meghan M. Biro: Mary Falkner has been in the HR trenches for years. She has worked on HR teams in many industries, including public [00:02:30] utilities, healthcare, energy and media. These days she's a full time HR problem solver at the HR consulting firm IA. Welcome my friend, Mary.

Mary Falkner: Thank you so much for having me Meghan. It's great to be here.

Meghan M. Biro: So excited you're here. IA, will you tell us more about what that means?

Mary Falkner: Absolutely. So we are a boutique business transformation firm. What we do is we help our clients who are going through any [00:03:00] kind of transformation, whether it be a selection for a new HCM, process improvement work. We help them make the business case in order to get the work approved.

We do process mapping with them so they fully understand what it is that they're doing today so that when they do get that new HCM in they don't make the same mistakes in the future, and then we just help them through that entire process.

Mary Falkner: We just love the work that we do and this it's just really great to be able to work with a number of different organizations [00:03:30] to move them forward.

Meghan M. Biro: And there's two key words, if you're listening out there Work Trends audience, problem solver. Love it, because there's so much of that that we need to unfold, right? And I tell you, I love talking to HR practitioners about how some of these big picture conversations have changed over the years.

Meghan M. Biro: So I have a burning question for Mary. How did you first get interested in the idea of employee experience?

Mary Falkner: [00:04:00] My first job was with an organization that had a reputation for having a tough culture. If you liked the way that company worked it was great. You felt fantastic. You could be really very successful there, but it could be really challenging if you were not 100% aligned with it.

Mary Falkner: It was kind of my first big girl job in corporate HR, and not long after I joined the recession hit and we had a lot of conversations around how are we treating people during this time. The decision [00:04:30] was, you know, when you're hiring people during a recession it's a buyer's market. It's really easy to just get them onboard. You can kind of treat them however because they need a job.

Mary Falkner: But we were really thinking through what are the impacts... How we treat people today during the recession is who we really are as an organization. If we are good to people now, they'll remember that later. So when the recession ends and everybody leaves are we going to be able to keep the people that we wanted to keep because we treated them the right way?

Mary Falkner: That really [00:05:00] kind of stuck with me, because you started to think back and you thought through more than just the money, because during the recession salaries weren't necessarily big and you didn't have a lot of budget to be able to help people out.

Mary Falkner: So that really got me thinking through more than just the typical how do people do their jobs, but it's also how are they experiencing their jobs, because you're at work for so many hours a week.

Meghan M. Biro: Oh, tell me about it. And it's never, ever about the money. Well, it can be about the money, I mean it can be, but not forever. There's got to be something [00:05:30] else, Mary, that's tied to culture, that's tied to where they're valued

there and what they find important about getting up and going every day though, you know?

Mary Falkner: Absolutely. I agree.

Meghan M. Biro: Could you give us some examples about how you've thought about employee experience in different organizations where you've worked? We'd love to hear just real life stories from you.

Mary Falkner: Sure. You know I think there's some universality around the employee experience that you have just in terms of valuing them as human beings [00:06:00] and meeting people where they are and all that sort of work.

Mary Falkner: But I've worked for so many different industries... I've worked for tiny little startups and big gigantic global organizations. So when I worked for Vestas, which is a wind turbine energy company, we were global. Most of my team was in a completely different country. They were either in Denmark or they were in the UK. I had one employee that I could physically see.

Mary Falkner: So when you think about the employee experience in that standpoint from a smaller team perspective, you have [00:06:30] to really think about how am I communicating? How am I coming across both on the phone or video chat or on email? But then you also have to think about when we roll out these programs we've got people in all these different countries.

Mary Falkner: We've got people who are in the field working on the turbines and we also have salespeople, that they're just completely different, so it's really being aware of the differences and how the employee experiences any messaging that you give them, and just being aware that if you're rolling out something new and exciting that's it's not just for one group of people. [00:07:00] Maybe corporate loves it, but the field can't experience it at all.

Mary Falkner: I've also worked for government agencies, which has a totally different look and feel for some of those industries. And what's interesting was when you worked for government is there's a level of... I hate to use the word entitlement because it's not totally fair-

Meghan M. Biro: Oh, you're going there today Mary.

Mary Falkner: I'm coming out a little bit.

Meghan M. Biro: Mary, you're going there. We like that. Bring it on.

Mary Falkner: But the only reason why is because in government you're Civil Service, so while it's true that we [00:07:30] can't... We can still fire you. It takes a lot more work.

You are not at will. You are a protected class. You have constitutional protection of your job as property and you can appeal a decision, even if it is for a cause, so there's a different approach to employee experience. There's not so much as like I need this job, it's like I've got this job.

Mary Falkner: So then you have to think about how are you treating your employees? How are you getting them engaged? Because there's a number of employees who do great work, and they do the same job for 35 years and they love it, but they have no desire to necessarily grow their skillset, [00:08:00] go up in the organization, and that's okay. You need people like that, and they love their job, like I said.

Mary Falkner: So how do you continue to give them an experience that helps them still feel valued? Sometimes you focus too much on getting people promoted, but they don't want to get promoted. So when you think through an employee experience in that situation it's really... You don't have a lot of budget. Where I worked they did not believe in bonuses.

Mary Falkner: We were not allowed to offer any kind of bonuses, so there wasn't a lot around compensation, so then you had to think about are we teaching managers to have good meaningful conversations? [00:08:30] Do we let the people who are out in the field digging trenches feel like we care about their safety and that it's important to us that they have the right PPE and the shoring is out there so that the walls don't fall in on them?

Mary Falkner: So it becomes a different conversation. I think people focus on things like technology and money and that sort of thing, and yes, that's important, and yes, you want to have that, but then think about your employee population and what it is that they value so that you create an experience that's meaningful to them.

Meghan M. Biro: I love the fact that you're bringing up the government sector [00:09:00] actually, because it is refreshing. And your other point is not everybody wants to get promoted, so let's stop putting that one size fits all technology on promotions for example. Get to know people in 3D. Look at them, their heart, their mind, their walk in life, and personalize it is really what I'm hearing from you.

Mary Falkner: Absolutely. And you're not going to be able to be all things to all people. It's not scalable. If you're a team of five, great, but most organizations are not. So [00:09:30] it's really about equipping leaders with the skillset to be able to adapt their approach to each of their employees.

Meghan M. Biro: So what are we going to do with the people out there right now, Mary, who are thinking yeah, we're working on employee experience? I know you want to help them be so much more, right? More effective, more focused. So we're going to play a little game. Work Trend listeners tune in. We're happy you're here.

[00:10:00] We're going to hear four questions you should ask yourself, because I think these are right on the money.

Meghan M. Biro: First, are you trying to solve employee experience just using tech? Mary, we want to hear from you on this angle.

Mary Falkner: Oh, please don't use just tech. Tech is a wonderful tool. It can help you be more efficient. It can help you reach more people more quickly. It can help you audit your data. But it is not a replacement for human [00:10:30] touch.

Mary Falkner: If you are not thinking through are my people paid what they're supposed to be paid, is there equality in the workplace, can they go to the bathroom and it's clean, is there parking for them... If you're not thinking through those basic things, then all the tech in the world is not going to improve your employees' experience.

Mary Falkner: They're going to be like great, you just spent a million dollars on the technology and I still don't have a desk that works. So you can't focus just on that.

Meghan M. Biro: Well here's my second question. Do you have [00:11:00] bright shiny object syndrome, which I know so many of us do right now. We are absolutely bombarded with information right now, and I know I've been guilty of it before. I know probably many of our listeners too, right? Like what are we chasing? What is this all about Mary? Boil it down for us, would you? I mean really do we need to be doing this?

Mary Falkner: No. And the challenge is... And I feel for practitioners in the workplace, because what happens is their leadership goes to a conference or they read an article [00:11:30] and they say we have to be doing this. This is new. Let's do it.

Mary Falkner: It might be the right solution for you, but what happens is rather than slow down and think about what your overall strategy is and what your overall approach is and, oh by the way, the readiness of your organization to chase that bright shiny object, they tend to feel like we're just going to buy it, and now you get to try to implement it.

Mary Falkner: They're not having the conversations they should have with the right people, and the next thing that happens is you... I mean implementations are not a flip the switch, as everyone who has ever worked in technology knows. [00:12:00] So it takes a lot of planning. It takes a lot of testing. It takes a lot of rollout.

Mary Falkner: So six months into this project you go to the next conference and the next bright shiny object pops up. If that's your way of working, you're just going to frustrate the heck out of your team and they're going to stop being all in on massive transformation because they worried about the next bright shiny object.

- Meghan M. Biro: Then what about the communication piece to all of us? I mean like I feel like half the time it's missing, so like [00:12:30] half of your employees actually know this is happening. Half are like what is this, and why are we using it, and could somebody please like tell us how this relates to where I sit in this culture? Like I feel like there's just... That's a whole missing hole.
- Mary Falkner: It is. It's fascinating to me when I talk to different organizations and leadership brings up oh, we have this great tool for people to do that, and then the people who are supposed to be using the tool say what is that? Where did that come from? So if you... It's like if you build it and nobody comes, did you really build it?
- Meghan M. Biro: [00:13:00] I love that, by the way. I mean that is the struggle I think a lot of organizations are having when we talk about HR tech adoption. The reality is yes, it sounds sexy, but a lot of the employees are still not using this because there's a massive, massive drop in the communication.
- Meghan M. Biro: Where not there where it's like it's baked into our culture and this is how like it matters to you, Mary, or myself, and how it relates to your background. Like there's [00:13:30] just no context there.
- Mary Falkner: Exactly. It's very frustrating.
- Meghan M. Biro: All right. So third question, are you really thinking about all your end users?
- Mary Falkner: Based on some organizations where I worked, I would say no, but people need to think through this. You have to have a clear understanding of who your users are. Some organizations when they go into a selection, they're thinking primarily about the administrator experiences. How will this make our lives better?
- Mary Falkner: That's one group of end users, but then the other side of it is what about [00:14:00] the employees? I brought up the difference between field and corporate in the past, and it's hard to remember that guys that are out on ladders installing equipment don't have a computer. They might have a tablet that might have wifi from time to time, so you have to really think about what is that user experience going to be.
- Mary Falkner: Luckily a lot of the technology that's out there is starting to have some good mobile applications, but not all of it. And if you are relying on that mobile application and yet you're not getting the mobile devices [00:14:30] for your employees it's not going to work.
- Mary Falkner: I wish more organizations would bring end users into if not the selection process, then just the planning process. Really sitting down with them and saying what do you use it for? What problems do you think that this would solve

for you, and to really understand... You know, if it benefits that's pretty easy in some ways. It's not so immediate.

Mary Falkner: But if it's something about... Like document sharing or getting onto a community of practice or something like that, [00:15:00] where somebody needs to access information right away, how would they use that tool? Is it easy for them to use? If it's negative 20 degrees in North Dakota during the winter and they need to access something are they going to be able to do it and is it fast and safe?

Mary Falkner: So it's really thinking through what problem are you trying to solve and are you solving it for the right reasons and the right people.

Meghan M. Biro: Do you have any idea how many organizations are actually including end users? Like are any? Like I'm almost scared to ask you this [00:15:30] question, like any data out there on this? Because it's a great question.

Mary Falkner: Yeah. You know, I don't know of any data out there. I'm sure there is and I'm sure 20 analysts will be listening to this and say I have it, and send it, and that's great. Please do.

Meghan M. Biro: Please do. Send it our way.

Mary Falkner: I do know in my personal experience a couple of organizations did at a really kind of superficial level, but it was better than nothing, you know. It was more we had a town hall to talk about this thing, but then we also asked them this. It wasn't necessarily [00:16:00] a scientific focus group or anything like that, but at least there was an attempt to get the pulse of the user groups. So it's better than nothing, but I would love to see more organizations think through that.

Meghan M. Biro: And also I'm going to kind of bring onboarding into this discussion. When you do talk about benefits or packages or like the way it really feels to work here, mobile is everything. Like people don't have time right now to go sit and go let me get my laptop up and, you know, I'm comparing offers and benefits and all of these things [00:16:30] before I make a decision in the next 18 hours.

Meghan M. Biro: It really truly is important for people to be thinking about how people feel internally when the... You know, like this is a touchy feely topic actually, I argue, right? We're moving towards that becoming that more human thing, right? And part of that is... You're absolutely right. Who's really thinking about the end users? So thank you for bringing this up. If you're out there listening on Work Trends tweet with us, share your thoughts. [00:17:00] I'm sure other people have opinions too.

Meghan M. Biro: Okay, final question. Are you on the same page with all the departments and people who work on employee experience?

Mary Falkner: I would say that a lot of people would have to... If they're honest about it, would say they're not, and it's not because for lack of trying. I think there's... Some places are extraordinary at it. Everybody is fully aligned with what the goals are. Every organization, every business unit is responsible [00:17:30] for thinking about it. It could be on their scorecard, whatever it might be and however they're defining experience.

Mary Falkner: But what often happens is that they're like HR, fix the employee experience, and then HR is like okay. We want to do X, Y and Z, when operations is like yeah, no, we don't want to do that, so we're not going to. Thanks.

Mary Falkner: Or you've got different business units that are excited about the employee experience, but they have a different idea of what that looks like and how it should function in their business unit.

Mary Falkner: So [00:18:00] for it to be really effective, to be something that the C-suite thinks is important, I think it's something that it needs to be thought about thoughtfully, which is a terrible way to describe it, using the word to define it, but really it really is.

Meghan M. Biro: You did it. I like that actually. Why not? It doesn't matter.

Mary Falkner: I am self-editing as we speak.

Meghan M. Biro: It's all good.

Mary Falkner: But it just... We go back to tech. If HR wants to do something with tech that's going to [00:18:30] improve the employee experience and they didn't talk to IT, that's not going to go well. Even if the CEO is like HR go do this, IT will not be necessarily a great partner with you. And it's not because you didn't ask for their expertise. You just made their job harder, because they weren't part of the selection and they have a ton of other projects that they have going on.

Mary Falkner: So I don't want to make it sound like there's this battle in business units out there because of ego... And yes that does happen, but it's just a natural reaction to we have jobs too. And if [00:19:00] we could all work together to be thoughtful about how we do this it's going to be great.

Meghan M. Biro: I think this is a really refreshing conversation, Mary, and I so appreciate... Because you have this viewpoint that so many others do not, where you've worked on so many different teams and industries, et cetera. IT and HR, HR and marketing... I mean I think those are the two that we're going to really start seeing more and more of, and it's just going to become an imperative. So we're going to have to all figure out how to play in the sandbox, right?

- Mary Falkner: Totally [00:19:30] agree. Yeah.
- Meghan M. Biro: I mean we got to get there, but we're not there right now.
- Mary Falkner: Yep. I always tell people when you join any organization the two people that you need to make best friends of is someone in IT and the EA of the CEO. That's the people that you need to be friends with.
- Meghan M. Biro: You hear that, everybody listening out there? Sage from Mary. There you go.
- Meghan M. Biro: I think it's hard for one person or one team to change an entire culture, right? But what's your best advice for HR people who feel frustrated, [00:20:00] powerless? I mean this is super real for people right now.
- Mary Falkner: Yeah, it is. And when you read these articles coming out about the Ubers and the Harvey Weinstein companies and all of the things where abuse has been happening and people are pointing a finger at HR, I agree there's a role that HR has played, but sometimes HR does raise the red flag and gets overrun by the business, so it can feel really disheartening for an HR practitioner.
- Mary Falkner: Having been in this situation at other organizations, my best advice is start local. You [00:20:30] are in HR. You are in a unique position in that you work with all parts of the organization and typically at all levels of the organization, so you can influence. And that's what we do in HR, we influence. We can't necessarily dictate so... Although I try. I've been told you can't dictate, just influence. I'm like I'm bossy.
- Mary Falkner: But what you can do though is you can point out if you make this choice here's what's going to happen, and just celebrate when somebody does something really [00:21:00] cool that works that might be contrary to what the culture is. Look, this little group tried it this way and their so successful.
- Mary Falkner: That same organization that had a challenging culture, we were able to... I owned the high potential development program and we had two service centers, and historically this one service center always outshone another because of their stats and everything, and the newer service center, they started implementing some of the new ideas of culture that we were trying to implement, and they started kicking the first service center's butt in all the metrics.
- Mary Falkner: [00:21:30] And when they asked how did that happen, we were able to point to changes that were specific in behavior that impacted the culture. So it's not going to be all-sweeping and you can point out like this is the program that I did and it's amazing. It's going to be those little wins and just bring it up like that.

Mary Falkner: Remember when we talked about that and how it worked, it's finding those wins and you know what, HR? You help influence the policy. You write the handbook. If somebody is trying to implement a policy that makes no sense to you speak up. Say why are we implementing this policy instead of just having a conversation with that employee [00:22:00] who's being an idiot?

Meghan M. Biro: Word of... Mary Falkner is on fire today everybody. I love this, and it's true. Like say something.

Mary Falkner: Yeah. Say something. Don't... I mean if you want to be strategic... And we want you to be strategic, right? You and I are probably the largest champions of this. Speak up, because... And that's becoming more and more prevalent. If you don't have a voice and you don't have that data and there's no storytelling there, you run a risk of getting ignored.

Meghan M. Biro: Exactly. Then you become an administrative [00:22:30] task completer, and nobody wants to do that. All right. So we've reached that time, Mary... We've got crystal ball time here at Work Trends, okay?

Mary Falkner: You do?

Meghan M. Biro: Yeah. So how do you think our conversation about the employee experience will change in the next few years?

Mary Falkner: So I think it will be one of two ways. I think part of it is going to depend on whether or not we do hit another true recession. What I hope is that if we do it's still going to be relevant. I hope that people don't think [00:23:00] of an employee experience as a nice to have. I hope it still remains a have to have.

Mary Falkner: It's not just about being a differentiator as an employer. It's about being a differentiator as a business. It's about changing the way that people think about work, about the way people think about even capitalism in some ways. I would hope that in a few years we're no longer talking about employee experience as a new thing, but as something that we need to sustain.

Meghan M. Biro: Thank you so much for stopping by.

Mary Falkner: Thank you for having me. This was great.

Meghan M. Biro: [00:23:30] Let's keep this conversation going, shall we? Join us for our Work Trends Twitter chat. We're going to be hanging on the Twitters with Mary Falkner on Wednesday, July 17th, at 1:30 p.m. eastern, 10:30 a.m. Pacific. Join us to talk about how to start improving the employee experience. We are going to get above this. We are going to tackle it, because I know so many of you, including myself, are kind of tired of hearing about it, but this is a good one. And

if you'd like to get our Twitter [00:24:00] chat questions in advance sign up for our newsletter at talentculture.com.

Meghan M. Biro: Thanks for listening to Work Trends from TalentCulture. Join us every Wednesday at 1:30 p.m. eastern for a live Twitter chat with our podcast guests. To learn more about guests featured on today's show visit the show notes for this episode at talentculture.com.

Meghan M. Biro: Help us spread the word. Subscribe [00:24:30] to Work Trends wherever you listen to podcasts. Leave us a rating review at iTunes. Share Work Trends with your coworkers, your friends. Look forward to it. See you next time.