

Meghan M. Biro: What's your story? If your company doesn't have a story, or it's a boring story that nobody wants to hear, you're in trouble. In the age of the employee, your employer brand matters more than ever. On today's episode of WorkTrends, we'll help you find the heart of your people story.

Meghan M. Biro: Welcome to the [00:00:30] WorkTrends Podcast from Talent Culture. I'm your host, Meghan M. Biro. Every week, we interview interesting people who are re-imagining work. And join us on Twitter every Wednesday, 1:30 PM Eastern using the hashtag WorkTrends. What's the best job in America right now? I'd say maybe margarita tester. Hmm. Well, according to the researchers at Glass Door, the best job in America is, drum [00:01:00] roll please, data scientist.

Meghan M. Biro: This new ranking uses three factors, earning potential, job satisfaction, and number of job openings. And Apparently, data scientists are well compensated, they're satisfied, and they're in demand. That's good to know if you're a data scientist, or if you're recruiting for them. But what if you're recruiting people for jobs that aren't as perfect? Let's talk to today's guest about this.

Meghan M. Biro: [00:01:30] Tiffany Sauder is uniquely qualified to talk about employer branding and crafting a people story. Over the past 15 years, she has built a business from the ground up. She is president of the marketing agency, Element Three, where she oversees 70 employees. Now she's seeing a new trend, companies needing to help attract employees. Welcome to [00:02:00] WorkTrends, Tiffany.

Tiffany Sauder: Thank you Megan. I'm excited to be here with you.

Meghan M. Biro: Excellent. So listen, Tiffany, tell us your story. How did you start your business?

Tiffany Sauder: I think a lot of people who find themselves as business owners, some were super intentional and some, you kind of accidentally fall into it. And I'm a bit more on the second type. I grew up in a real crazy entrepreneurial home. And where people talk about their dad threw baseballs to them, our dad threw P and Ls at us. So [00:02:30] it was real intentional, just financial literacy, and sort of teaching us about business and where I grew up.

Tiffany Sauder: And so I went to Purdue, I got a degree in finance. And I thought I wanted to be a big company girl. And so I started at Lilly, a big pharmaceutical company here in Indianapolis, and I thought that was going to be really cool. And what I realized in big business, while there's a lot of opportunity to learn and train, it's going to be a long time until you make a decision of any real consequence. And so I started to realize maybe small business [00:03:00] is a better fit for just my need for needing to get quick feedback on my decisions, and my appetite for risk taking, and kind of just wanting to see. What can I do with my own two hands, so to speak?

Meghan M. Biro: I want to go back and hear a little bit more about your dad and growing up in this way. I think it's going to be very interesting for our audience. Everybody has a career story, a context, something that hits them personally as they're thinking about what they want to be when they grow up. And what was it about your dad [00:03:30] and your family dynamics that played into that for you?

Tiffany Sauder: Yeah. I think that he taught us really early to not fear the outcome of things, but to control the sort of intensity of your input. And I think he had a lot of different businesses and enterprises, and we worked alongside him a lot as kids. And he just showed us, not knowing how to do something is not a reason not to try. Not knowing if you're going to be [00:04:00] successful is not a reason not to start. And he really was just very empowering.

Tiffany Sauder: So I think in a big corporate environment, I started to realize, Oh, there's a lot that's already been solved. There's not the wild, wild West. And while I didn't know that, that was what I grew up in, it was. I mean, he'd say "There's a Bobcat. Here's how you drive it. Go do it." Drive to Chicago three days after you get your license. You know how to read, don't you? And he just was very like, I don't know ... You were telling me if you don't think you can-

Meghan M. Biro: Figure [00:04:30] it out.

Tiffany Sauder: Yeah. But I think you can. And so I think just growing up in an environment where it started with, I think you can, really in entrepreneurship, I talked to a young man a week ago after I presented and he said, "What's the biggest failure?" And I said, "For entrepreneurs, the biggest thing you have to chase down as your own self talk, and you have to believe longer than other people that you can do it."

Meghan M. Biro: And I think you also have to have, speaking from one entrepreneur to another at this point, I think you have to have a fire. I think you have to have a long [00:05:00] range vision of things that maybe others don't have. We are able to kind of read into a crystal ball, and most importantly, take chances.

Tiffany Sauder: And I think [crosstalk 00:05:09].

Meghan M. Biro: Take risks, right?

Tiffany Sauder: Yeah, totally.

Meghan M. Biro: Know that know that you're going to lose before you win. And you're going to lose over and over again. But the winning ultimately will happen if you just stick to it.

Tiffany Sauder: Yeah. My dad says, "Hard is not the end. It's just hard." He said, "People believe that because it's hard, that must be a sign of the end." He's was like, "No, it's just hard. Keep going."

Meghan M. Biro: [00:05:30] Don't create drama when there's no drama. And I think you're right. So many of us talk ourselves down. So I want to hear about the new trends you're seeing among your clients. What are people asking for right now?

Tiffany Sauder: Yeah. This idea of looking at employer branding really was not something that I thought of and conjured up on my own. It was really this, clients that we did brand, corporate brand development for, three, five, seven years ago, were starting to call us back up and saying, "Can you do that thing for [00:06:00] us, but do it for our internal marketplace, our internal employee engagement, instead of doing it for sort of external customer purposes?".

Tiffany Sauder: And I think part of it is two things. One is we're in just a really peculiar talent climate, where we've just experienced so much economic growth that we're almost over employed as a country. That's certainly part of it. But I also think it's coming, sort of that line as crossing with the fact that we have this millennial generation [00:06:30] that is asking different things for us as companies than what we have habits to provide them. And so HR teams, talent teams, culture teams are beginning to say, "We have to take what has been historically very intuitive about who we are as a company, and turn that into something that we can say very explicitly, so that that message can scale, and we can build a brand, and it can continue to grow." So that's really how it came to be.

Meghan M. Biro: What are some of the mistakes you see companies making when they start to articulate [00:07:00] their own employer brand?

Tiffany Sauder: Well, the first one is that they try to copy the thing they saw that they love, and they lose a sense of personal ownership for it. So a lot of times, this employer brand things comes to bear because somebody was at a conference, or they've got a friend who works at the company, or their son who just graduated from an Ivy league school went and worked at this thing, whatever the thing is, there's some sort of external impetus that says ... Or they lose a big candidate in the interview process, and they're super pissed off [00:07:30] about it.

Tiffany Sauder: So all of that is kind of this external factor where somebody says, "We've got to do something about this." And then first, their idea is, I'm going to call somebody I know who knows about messaging. And I'm going to have them make me like this, and whatever that sort of point of inspiration is. And so a big mistake that I see companies make is they try to copy what they love, and emulate something that isn't them, versus really taking ownership of: What are the things that make you great? And be honest with yourself about the things you aren't. We chase words like innovation, and [00:08:00] I think that's a big

one. And some companies at their core are not innovative, and that can be okay. How do you become exceptional at the thing that you are?

Meghan M. Biro: Yeah, I love that you bring that up because I've struggled with that over the years too. It's like, really, this is the most boring culture and predictable place to be ever. Why are you calling yourself innovative? It's not true. And people will smell that and see that now a mile away, especially when you talk about gen Z, who are just [00:08:30] starting to graduate from college now, they're seeing through it even more than millennials, I'd argue.

Tiffany Sauder: Yeah. And I think all of us as businesses live in glass houses at this point, with all of the different review sites and just transparency and social connectedness of our employee population now. I mean, we literally can't hide anything. So the sooner you can either stare down the bear, and when I speak on this to HR professionals, I say, "The most uncomfortable thing you may have to tell your leadership [00:09:00] team is that there's nothing interesting about our culture." So we can either spend a bunch of money and lie to the marketplace, and basically speed up the path to failure. Or we can own that and say, "Well, what about us does not feel comfortable in our own skin? What about us does not feel we can own it, own the things that are about us?" And I have this, I think about like my younger self.

Tiffany Sauder: I've been doing this Element Three thing for about 15 years. And I sort of was like a corporate avatar. And I think that's what we are. [00:09:30] How do I make corporate Tiffany? And I thought that I had to make kind of an avatar of myself. And I didn't understand until later in my own leadership journey, that the quirky parts of who I am are actually the thing that are the most, I think, attractive, and why people work for me. But it was the slowest thing for me to own because it didn't fit the mold of a grownup in the way that I thought of it when I was 28 years old. So I think we make corporate avatars of ourself, and they [00:10:00] are just kind of boring. And I think those brave enough to really embrace the quiriness of their leadership team, the quiriness of their culture, and sort of be super authentic are going to be the ones that win the race.

Meghan M. Biro: And it's not just about being innovative. I mean, that's only one piece, and it's so small. And so what, you're boring, maybe there's something really interesting about being boring. Maybe you're a highly introspective person, or a culture, and you hire thinkers. How cool is that?

Tiffany Sauder: Completely. Yep. Completely.

Meghan M. Biro: [00:10:30] If you're out there in our audience, and you're listening on WorkTrends, share your thoughts with us. What does it mean to be cool? Right? That's a question for me right now. What does that really mean? Can we move ahead and beyond this concept of being an innovative and cool, in air quotes, culture? What does that even mean anymore? So listen, I want to hear about

your own employer brand story. What's it like to work for your team? And how do you talk about that, both internal [00:11:00] and external?

Tiffany Sauder: Yeah. At Element Three, it's kind of been an interesting journey of uncovering our employer brand, and some of it has been my people reflecting it back to me. And some of it has been my own vision for who we are and what we would become. So that's another thing I would definitely give the WorkTrends listeners, is this is not surely a top down function of defining this. It is really listening to your internal corporate champions, and the nuance of the way that they speak about their employment [00:11:30] experience with you compared to other places, et cetera.

Tiffany Sauder: So for us we have this silly little mascot, the elephant. And that came to be, we were going through a bit of a rebranding, and a copywriter was working too late one night and said, "Element Three is really Elephant Three. What if we rebranded it that?" And then this elephant sort of idea came to bear. And the elephant for us, I don't recommend everybody go and get a mascot because that can come off real forced and corny if it doesn't kind of come to bear [00:12:00] naturally.

Meghan M. Biro: I know. I was like, "I don't want to say anything to you because you and I just met." But whoa, I'm tempted to say something snarky. I've got to be honest with you.

Tiffany Sauder: Well, I'll continue to talk about what that speaks to. But one of the things I think listeners can take from that is that we do have to create symbols for our cultures, so that people can connect to them. If you think about university settings, they do such a great job of making sweatshirts and pennants, and things [00:12:30] that we say, "I am going to put these in my office and my bedroom, on the back of my car," because these symbols say something about who I am as a person. And we do have to create symbols for people to connect to as brands and as cultures. In our environment, it's stickers on your computer, it's patches on your backpack, it's a tee shirt you wear.

Meghan M. Biro: Yeah. But I'd also ... Number one, I'll buy it. Right? I buy what you're saying. But number two, if you look at the psychology of people in college, or at [00:13:00] a university, they're not bound to one thing. They're able to kind of be free and attach. Whereas in a corporate culture, there's so much pressure, that that's when that phoniness or fakeness comes through. Does that make sense? So how do we get over that hurdle of, well now I'm part of a culture, or some sort of a corporate structure? That's where I think that whole forced thing comes from, whereas if you're on a college campus, you can just fly that freak flag, and no judgment because you're not [00:13:30] owned by the university or culture, so to speak, if I'm playing devil's advocate.

Tiffany Sauder: Well, let's take ... I've been part of organizations, let's say they're manufacturing. And they have a culture of extreme focus on safety, and they have a lot of pride culturally around the days of continuous, without an accident. And so there are symbols inside that manufacturing floor, things that are painted on the walls, things that are by where you wash your hands, tee shirts [00:14:00] that people wear, that are really centered around this, safety is all of our jobs. And I, in wearing this tee shirt, wearing this sock hat, wearing this sort of patch on my jacket, and claiming ownership for my part in this idea of creating a super safe culture, not only for myself but in responsibility to my colleagues.

Tiffany Sauder: So that to me is still an example of a symbol, something that you can actually say, "I'm taking ownership of this," not just by raising my hand at an all company meeting, but [00:14:30] by actually putting it on myself and saying, "This is part of what I am working to advance, the cause of safety." So I don't think it ... For us this crazy elephant, we call ourselves a herd. And that is a bit of a ... Because the word is family is two-

Meghan M. Biro: Now I'm getting a visual on this. I'm like, "Oh, goodness." And are you on Instagram with us? That's my next question.

Tiffany Sauder: Yeah, for sure. We are. But this idea of an elephant herd is a matriarchal community, so that obviously fits because I'm a female business [00:15:00] leader. It also is the only animal in the animal kingdom that have empathy, and mourn when somebody is separated from the herd. And emotional intelligence is a big part of who we are. And I think there's a lot of intuition in marketing, and then the dynamic between us and our clients. And so if we aren't able to really step into sort of the truth of things really fast, it's going to slow down our work progress. So the elephant also is a call to arms of, look, we have to be able to be bold. We have to be able to put the truth on the table. [00:15:30] And so while it is a sort of corny little character, and we all have, I think, a sort of healthy understanding of, it's super cheesy.

Meghan M. Biro: Or so we hope.

Tiffany Sauder: Yeah, I would say. I think if you came into our culture, I hope you would say. But what people feel like is, this is a nod to who we are. And it's a way to encompass all of these words into a single symbol. And sometimes those are badges, sometimes those are logos, sometimes those come to bear in different ways. But that's a big [00:16:00] part of how we normalize people into who we are and teach them.

Meghan M. Biro: What's your advice to, say, an HR leader who feels overwhelmed by the idea of building an employer brand? And how should we all start thinking about this?

Tiffany Sauder: One of the things that we do when we walk into a new organization thinking about this for the first time, is the sales team has long thought about the sales process from awareness, consideration, and all the way down into client or customer. If you think about the [00:16:30] employee life cycle all the way from new hire, making people aware of your brand, getting people to apply for a job, they're in the selection side of you versus competitors. I think, thinking through the funnel of talent, all the way from, they're just aware of my brand, to they're an employee, or they're leaving, and I'm thinking about alumni relations.

Tiffany Sauder: Where in that process are you most experiencing pain as a company? And start there. I think we try to go from, I'm not doing [00:17:00] anything, to I'm making my recruiting process better, I'm making my onboarding process better. I'm making our employee development plan. But they try to do all of it, and they spread the resources so thin that the organization never feels the impact of progress anywhere.

Tiffany Sauder: Think about this as like a three year journey, to go all the way through that process really well. Big companies and small, I just don't see them do it faster than that. It just takes about three years, which can feel like bad news. But if you do it well, each one of those will be [00:17:30] institutional to the whole experience, instead of it being like a flash mob marketing, where it works for a little and then goes away.

Meghan M. Biro: And that happens a lot.

Tiffany Sauder: Oh yeah. All the time.

Meghan M. Biro: All the time, like we've got to get this done in eight months, and you're either on board with our culture, or you're not. And now it's going to get shown through our process. I mean, that's an extreme case, but it's out there.

Tiffany Sauder: I also think it's real difficult to get this done without the highest level leader really [00:18:00] engaged and invested. So that would be the other place I would start, is do the work to get the owner, the CEO, the board, whoever the person is, because you need them committed to the strategy for a long, long time.

Meghan M. Biro: Okay. Tiffany. It is crystal ball time. So how do you think our conversation about employer branding is going to change in the next few years? And do you think the power balance will change yet again?

Tiffany Sauder: I don't. I think the power is going to remain in the hands of the employees. I think the biggest [00:18:30] thing that is going to change, and we've seen this across so many different marketing domains, is that right now there's arbitrage. There are a few people doing it well, but most aren't. And so there's still first mover advantage in a lot of industries. And I think in two years, when we're

talking about this, we're going to say, "The barrier to entry just keeps getting higher."

Tiffany Sauder: And I think that that's going to be a thing. The other thing that I really hope we begin to see is that as brands, we're really used to doing customer case studies and testimonials. I would [00:19:00] love to see it become much more ubiquitous for companies to speak to their employee case studies. These are the people that we brought in, just out of college. Or these are the people that we brought in as first time leaders. And look where they have gone. Or look at the opportunities that they got as a result of working here. I think our ability to see our employees with a more abundant vantage point like that will really be a way to tell our stories as brands and as leaders in a way that we have not historically in business.

Meghan M. Biro: Well, fabulous, Tiffany. [00:19:30] Thank you so much for stopping by.

Tiffany Sauder: Yeah, it's been really fun to chat with you. Thanks for having me, Meghan.

Meghan M. Biro: Let's keep this conversation moving. Join us for our WorkTrends Twitter chat. We are going to be on the Twitters with Tiffany Sauder on Wednesday, August 28th at 1:30 PM Eastern, 10:30 AM Pacific, or wherever you're hanging out around the globe. Join us to talk about telling your company's people story. And if you'd [00:20:00] like to get our Twitter chat questions in advance, sign up for our newsletter at talentculture.com.

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