Meghan M Biro:	On today's episode of WorkTrends. We're talking about the intersection of HR and marketing with Donna Scarola.
Meghan M Biro:	Welcome to the 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 [00:00:30] Eastern, using the #WorkTrends. When I was thinking about this episode, I knew I wanted to talk to today's guest, my friend, Donna Scarola, about how HR people can be better marketers.
Meghan M Biro:	Then you know how it goes. I saw that headline in Ad Week, Three Advertising Strategies That Can Be Applied to Your HR Department. Here's the big takeaway. Just like advertisers want to develop hyper-personalized ads... Alexa, seriously stop [00:01:00] listening to my conversations by the way. It's annoying. Okay. I digress. Employees, they want to feel more engaged, if they get experiences that are tailored to them. It's time to get rid of these one size all fits approaches. I think there's a lot we can do to customize work for each employee. In Mercer's latest workplace study, 51% of employees said they wished their company offered more flexible work options. So personalization, thinking like marketers. [00:01:30] Let's dig deeper with today's guest.
Meghan M Biro:	A few months ago I met the one and only Donna Scarola at a conference in New York City, and she is one of the smartest people I've met in HR, and she's also my BFF. She's one of those people that I met, and like five minutes later we were like, "We're going to know each other for the rest of our lives." She's that cool. So [00:02:00] today she's here with me, and I think we're going to learn a lot from her experience working on big HR challenges. Welcome to WorkTrends, Donna.
Donna Scarola:	Thank you so much, Meghan. Wow. I don't know how to follow that one up, but I am so excited to chat today about some really exciting things.
Meghan M Biro:	I love when I get to talk to someone who's been in the weeds working as an HR practitioner, and you have a really unique background because you worked in HR, and you've worked with HR tech vendors. And you have actually taught [00:02:30] HR courses at the university level. So tell us about your career so far.
Donna Scarola:	It's been an interesting ride, and each step along the way, it's kind of funny. I feel all of the people close to me have been like, "What are you doing next?" This makes no sense. But somehow the story has kind of come together, which is really awesome. So out of grad school, when I studied HR, I went into tech and I kind of had this passion between technology and HR because I had started my career at Apple doing training and development. And so I was like, "Let me [00:03:00] figure out how HR technology is built." And so I went to Workday and I worked on their talent and performance platform, and then went over to Reflektive and worked on, I led the real-time feedback product there.

Donna Scarola: During this time I was teaching and actually curating two new courses in workforce development and performance management at San Francisco State, which was really exciting. And then about a year ago I left the tech world and went to Johnson & Johnson, and now I work in global talent management, and right now I'm really focused on digital [00:03:30] strategy. So it's been really interesting. I feel like each step has been this different perspective, but it's all the same problem.

Meghan M Biro: I think it's so cool that you're brave enough to just dive in and go, "You know what? I don't have all the answers, but I'm just going to find them." And you also left San Francisco, which was kind of a big deal for you, wasn't it?

Donna Scarola: Yeah, it definitely was. I feel like it's the height of everything right now in culture, and there's HBO TV shows, right? Silicon Valley is a great example of ... There's [00:04:00] such a fascination with San Francisco, not just because of tech, but because of the unique history of the city. And it was a big deal leaving and going out east, but it's such a special place, and I kind of always say it's never a goodbye. I Totally can see myself moving back.

Meghan M Biro: See, you and I share that in common. We're both from the northeast basically. As everybody here knows, I spend a lot of time in San Francisco because I've got lots of clients there and friends there, and I've really developed a community [00:04:30] there over really the last decade or so. So let's talk about big problems that you're solving. I know there's a lot on your plate, but what's top of mind right now? What are you trying to solve?

Donna Scarola: That's a great question and kind of similar to before, I don't know if I have all the answers, but I can definitely dive into what I'm at least trying to get the answers to. And it kind of is broken into a few pillars. The first one, I think every HR person on the planet can relate to budget. HR teams tend to be [00:05:00] understaffed and really stretched very thin. So I think the first one is always budget and resourcing, and how do we work in new ways with new skills? And that's something that I feel like we can dive into in a little bit. It's definitely that new skills focus.

Donna Scarola: The second is the infrastructure, most especially HR digital teams. Something that I'm really focused deeply on right now is most organizations that I find, and I noticed this when I was on the software side, but I especially feel this now, is that most [00:05:30] organizations aren't modeled for SaaS solutions. I think most organizations still are in a hyper, "We customize, we want the software to fit our strategy exactly, and our process." So what happens is the organizational model, it doesn't really help get things done, not only quickly, but in an effective way to really drive what they're trying to drive. So that's a really big one.

Donna Scarola: And so we're trying to figure that out. And I think we're doing a good job. But it's definitely something, even when I benchmark and talk to friends and colleagues [00:06:00] in other organizations, it's a problem. And I think HR is

Meghan M Biro:	And you know what? I have a burning question. What part, because I'm just geeking out now with you, right? What part of the SAS solution, though? Like give us some details, an example perhaps of this.
Donna Scarola:	Absolutely. So the context, when I look at, and especially when I was at Workday and I would see large enterprises come on to Workday, when you had on-premise [00:06:30] solutions, when you think of Oracle in the early 2000s, those... And that's just one example. Right? There's a lot of on-premise solutions, hyper-customized, and so you had these really, really large IT teams who were... They would build it out. They were basically internal software engineers. So you had software engineers at the software company who would then hand over the software. You bought it, and then hand it over to these IT teams and organizations and say, "Okay, now you customize." And so HR was just used to going over to IT and saying, "Hey, [00:07:00] here's a drawing of what I want. Go build it."
Donna Scarola:	PeopleSoft was really similar, even before its acquisition of Oracle, so that was the common trend. And so the org structure was heavy IT. You don't need that much of HR to really get involved, but now with a lot of services, HR services is becoming a much more important tier in organizations. Now, when you think about it is you have a Workday, or a Reflektive, or any SaaS solution, really, Betterworks, BetterUp. But what they do is they have a roadmap. Right? And all [00:07:30] their customers are on the same line of code, as we say, but they're on the same version, the same way that we're all on the same version of Google or Facebook. And you're able to configure, not customize, but to configure to a degree that makes sense for your company. But they don't give you as much rope to really truly go wild.
Donna Scarola:	And so the level of need for IT specialization is somewhat still needed, but I would say not in such a level of detail and these people, these [00:08:00] roles I should say, need to be really good at is understanding that software really, really well, but also understanding the strategy and process to bring it to life because there's no more blue skying it. You really have to understand, "Okay, what is the vision of this software company and how can I make it work for my organization?" But unfortunately, the model was flipped on its head before. So that's where I see it's like it's less on IT. It's more on HR services and a tighter relationship with the more strategy R&D HR of thinking [00:08:30] of what they want to drive and what they want to solve, and partnering more with HR Services to figure that out.
Meghan M Biro:	Well, and I think you mentioned this before, HR can't communicate in a language other than HR half the time.

Donna Scarola: Yes. That was totally where I was going, which is, that's the last kind of big problem that I find that is both so related to technology, and at the same time is a skill that you still need without technology. And HR in this way that is, you know, very... It's from a strong organizational lens, [00:09:00] but even more than organizational lens, it's from a lens of, "All my users are the same. All their needs are the same. So I'm going to speak in a language that benefits me and kind of covers everything that's in my head, and I'm going to do a brain dump." And that, to me, is that the antithesis of really getting people's attention in a time where employees are overworked, they're stretched thin. I mean just the macro trends of the economy, like people are spending more and more time working and they have less time to read things like emails [00:09:30] and 12 page documents, let's say, on change management.

Meghan M Biro: I mean, you just make-

Donna Scarola: And so it's a problem.

Meghan M Biro: Let me just say something. Right? I know I just need to have a moment with you to say, "Donna..." I think you know, even being a friend of mine, I don't even respond to emails. The quickest way to get me now is text or on Instagram, because I'm just literally [crosstalk 00:09:53] No, no, no. Literally I'm overwhelmed by my email. So if you're out there right now and you're trying to reach me, send me a tweet with WorkTrends [00:10:00] and say hello. I'm sorry. I'm like four weeks behind on emails, perpetually. It's ridiculous.

Donna Scarola: Absolutely. And when you go up the chain, absolutely, and you go up the chain in an organization, or someone like you who's an entrepreneur, it's really difficult because emails and messaging, everyone... I saw this great quote recently, and I can't remember where it was from, but it said, "We're in a time where everyone wants something from someone."" And that shows up in so many things, right, emails, advertisements. We're [00:10:30] scraping data in every aspect of people's lives. And so there comes a point where it's like if you want to do good work, you have to calm down the noise.

Meghan M Biro: I love it. That's why I'm so into yoga. Right? And you're digging Pilates these days.

Donna Scarola: I love Pilates. Yeah, it is my one hour of the day to not be looking at a technology.

Meghan M Biro: Well, one of the things that I find interesting is the idea of language and communication in HR right now. What are some examples [00:11:00] of how we can simplify our language and talk to each other in a way that is effective?

Donna Scarola: I think this is, again, it's such a fundamental skill and I think in many ways we've missed the boat in HR. If you look at the trends in marketing, I mean marketing has always for the most part been really analytics driven. And what they find is

when you use more natural language, people are more responsive, and you're seeing those trends a lot in, I'll give one example, like Outdoor Voices is this athletic brand really targeted originally towards women, now is [00:11:30] expanding into men's wear. All of their marketing is just like just doing things. I mean it's like the opposite of adidas and Nike years ago. Right? And that's just a small example.

Donna Scarola: But I think what's important is that, when I think of marketers versus HR, is marketers in product marketing for example, which I used to work very closely with product marketing, we would think, "Who are users?" It's not just one population. It never is, but HR tends to not do that. And so we don't think about the human centricity of it.

Meghan M Biro: Which seems bizarre to me though. [00:12:00] Wait a minute. Did you just say what I think you said?

Donna Scarola: I think I might have, and I'm sure people will not be happy with me for saying that, but it is my own experience as both an employee. You know, for a long time I didn't work in HR. Now I do. But now even being on the HR side, my team and I will always put our heads together and we're like, "How can we make it more simple? How can we make it more human?" So it sounds like I'm texting you instead of I'm sending you a change management process. That's not how our brains [00:12:30] process information, or want to. Right?

Donna Scarola: And back to that time zap and noise, marketers, they think about how can I get the two seconds that someone will look at an email, how can I make them laugh or catch their attention or shock them? And instead HR, has tended to be like, "Let me give you three well-written but three paragraphs on what's new." And it's like, that's not going to work. Because when you look at your users, the average employee's going to spend less than 30 seconds scanning [00:13:00] that email and deciding if they want to click, or your people leaders, they're looking for very specific information. And if you don't give them something that even alludes to that, you're going to give them that, you're out of luck. Right? They're just going to delete it. And there's no real consequence to that.

Meghan M Biro: I remember I started, oh five, six years ago with the idea that HR is becoming like marketers and it was like, "No way. What are you talking about? Crazy talk." Because we're also inundated with information all the time that we have to get creative, to be efficient, to communicate. [00:13:30] It's ridiculous, but it's true. So tell us, I know you've been looking at some interesting research about persuasion, so tell us more about that.

Donna Scarola: So one, really fascinated by the work of someone named Christopher Yates, and he has a book that he co-wrote with Pooja Sachdev, and they wrote a book called Rewire: A radical Approach to Tackling Diversity and Difference. And I'll give you the short and sweet version, because no one has time to go read the long version. So the summary [00:14:00] is they studied political propaganda.

	And when I say political propaganda, I mean political propaganda. I mean ISIS, the Nazi party. I am talking the evils of the world, and how they used very few words in combination with images to change people's psychological perception of facts and ideas, and how that just absolutely takes off and can change a whole country's perspective on a religion, on race, on [00:14:30] things that are really fundamental to our values and beliefs.
Donna Scarola:	And so essentially they took this idea, made it for good, and I understand there are ethical implications to that, but they were trying to to solve a very specific problem of diversity and inclusion at HSBC Bank of seeing more women and people of color in positions of leadership. And so essentially, go read the book if you want to read it. It's really fascinating.
Donna Scarola:	But what I take away from that is that you can build a 20 minute training on unconscious bias. And I'm not saying that's bad, but if you think that 90% of your [00:15:00] users are going to watch it, actually pay attention, and not multitask with their actual job that their manager wants them to get done, because that's where their bonus comes from, then you're not in touch with reality. And so how can we use what they've done where they literally only used images and no more than, I would say six to eight words to actually influence. And by the way, they were very successful in the end with actually changing diversity at HSBC Bank. So to me that spoke volumes.
Meghan M Biro:	It's all about [00:15:30] the outcomes in the data. Right?
Donna Scarola:	Exactly.
Donna Scarola:	So this is all so interesting, and when it comes down to it, I think HR's job is to simplify and make it easier for people to do their jobs. Right? So I want to hear your perspective on talent enablement.
Donna Scarola:	For me, at the end of the day, I always say it's like a really simple model. It's like who are your people, right? That's your talent. What kind of work are they trying to do? And how do you make an environment in which they can do it well, but also [00:16:00] you can make the environment better so that that circle can continue, and grow, and get better. For me, it's getting out of the way a little bit. That's number one.
Donna Scarola:	Number two, it's using technology on where people work, and it's back to the language. Right? It's using that marketing mindset of, "How do I get to them quick, give them just what they need to know, not everything I think they need to know, but just what they need to know?" And so forget all the policies and procedures and the process. That all has to exist somewhere, and it has a place, but the same [00:16:30] way that we think of user experience with marketing, we see this trend now, and I know you're all over it, but employee experience, and it's the same thing.

Donna Scarola: So if we don't update basically how we're enabling talent to do great work, then we're not doing talent management or enablement in an effective way at all. And so we have to strip away all of these old paradigms to really let ourselves reinvent what HR is, in my opinion.

Meghan M Biro: So you've been on both sides [00:17:00] of HR tech, as we talked about earlier, both the provider and the buyer. What's your best advice for people who are buying HR tech right now?

Donna Scarola: Such a good question. So when you're buying HR tech, there's a few things. First I think it's really, and it sounds so fundamental and basic ,and I'm sure someone's going to roll their eyes, and I don't blame them, but it's first define your problem. Because what I find, as someone who's been on the other side of the table, is if you just like the look of it, or you're like, "I just want to see a demo and see if we [00:17:30] can fit it into our organization, and maybe what we're trying to do," if you haven't defined that, what ends up happening is you don't have a baseline for what you're measuring and what you're driving towards.

Donna Scarola: And the second reason I say that is because every software has a unique proposition in some way. They do something really good, but that means they do a lot of other things not so good. So if you're to solve for engagement, but you get really excited about this other platform that really is more focused on capability building, let's say, you've now bought this software, you've implemented it and you're measuring engagement, [00:18:00] you're going to be in trouble. So I think it's first defining that problem and getting alignment with your stakeholders, whoever they are, making that really clear and first measuring it. Before you do the software, always do a pilot and tests. I kind of hate the word pilot actually. I should say experiment.

Meghan M Biro: Well, I mean, okay. Quick question though, for how long? Because I know a lot of people out there, including myself, I'm a habitual tester. Okay. I want to test everything. What are the boundaries for us testers?

Donna Scarola: Totally. [00:18:30] I'm trying not to give too much away here, but I've seen people test for over a year. And so if you think of that agile mindset going into product manager mode, but a test, if you define like, "I want to know if a user likes the UI, will do this," et cetera, et cetera, you should be able to do that in a 30 day timeframe. And I really mean that.

Donna Scarola: So I think most tests should be 30 to 60 days maximum. You should have a before, a during, and an after, some form of a measurement, and don't have 100 metrics. [00:19:00] Just have three or four, and get really clear on what's your problem, what's the hypothesis, which is the technology, and what what does the data show, and I mean both quantitative but also qualitative data because that is really powerful in user experience, is how do people feel? Do they like the look of it and all-

Meghan M Biro: Oh, okay. Thank you for bringing that up. Right?

Donna Scarola: Yeah.

Meghan M Biro: Because we are in HR after all. Come on. Right?

Donna Scarola: Exactly. Exactly.

Meghan M Biro: We've got to feel good about something here. It's not [00:19:30] just about a piece of technology. We're human, after all, thus the conundrum. Right? But let's turn this around a little bit. What's your best advice for tech companies? How can they help HR people right now?

Donna Scarola: That is a phenomenal, phenomenal question. And it is because there are so many stage gates for people to test. And so I think for software companies, when you think about engaging, it's first do your due diligence of finding out what they're trying to solve. Because if they haven't done their homework [00:20:00] on the opposite side, you're going to be able to speed that up. But the second is how can you get a faster way for people to test things without implementing their employee data? And so I'm getting a little technical here. I'm nerding out with you. The biggest blocker to testing software is going to be data and privacy.

Meghan M Biro: Yeah, no. Zero question. Zero question.

Donna Scarola: So how can... And I've seen a few software companies do this and I think it's brilliant. You give them fake organizational data that's complex, that's pre-loaded, that looks like Dunder Mifflin, let's [00:20:30] say. Right? Is that something that people can relate to, like Friends or The Sopranos, and it's preloaded, and give 20 people access in that company and say, "You have access for two weeks or 30 days." And let them play around, because I hate to say, 80% of the discovery phase is experiential. It's not the demo, the demo always, and we all know this and it's not a bad thing, but the demo always is prettier than real life. It's the same way that Instagram is prettier than real life.

Meghan M Biro: See, I knew you were going to go there.

Donna Scarola: [00:21:00] And actually to that, this is another thing I want to advise for software companies, and I hope they're really listening to this one. They all try to sell their whole suite, which I get why. You want to land in one area, kind of hook them, your customers, and say, "Oh, you want performance management. Let me hook you there. And, oh do you also want our five other offerings?" But when I look at, and there was a great Burson article earlier this year on this, which is basically HR has gone from this idea of one-stop shop, I want one [00:21:30] HR application that does it all, to the realization that that's not how we operate in our consumer lives. Right? In every day you have Instagram, and Spotify, and Netflix, and Facebook, which you use Facebook to log on to almost

all of those things. There needs to be a core dataset, meaning a universal profile for yourself and an organization.

Donna Scarola: But you don't need one application. You just need each of them to do it really well. And so my advice to software companies is don't try to bite off more [00:22:00] than you can chew. Do something really well. And then on the ladder, integrate really well with the other ones that do what you don't do well better. That would be my advice, is because it's a much better sell, and I think we're going to start seeing that in the market, of more and more partnerships. And we already are. And I think it's the right move as opposed to, you know, Facebook also trying to be my music center.

Meghan M Biro: I'm not feeling that, by the way. Just for the record, I'm just not feeling it.

Donna Scarola: I'm glad you said that, because that's how I respond [00:22:30] to the idea of like, "I don't want them to be everything." And you even see it with Amazon. Right? No one really, I mean I could be insulting people here, but no one uses Amazon Music.

Meghan M Biro: Well some people do, but not as many as are using Spotify.

Donna Scarola: Exactly, exactly. And that's more to my point, is how do we create a beautiful ecosystem instead of a one-stop shop, because I think that's an impossible parameter to put onto software.

Meghan M Biro: All right. It's crystal ball time. When you look and [00:23:00] you see deep, deep inside that purple ball that you're looking into now, how will work in HR change in the next five to 10 years? What are some of your predictions?

Donna Scarola: These are my three. These are my three predictions, and I'll explain them. The first, data science. Not a shocker there, but I want to explain that a little bit further because I hear this word all the time and it's like the word strategy 15 years ago, "Everyone be more strategic in HR." Now it's like, "Use more data, use data science." I see data science, not [00:23:30] HR professionals becoming data scientists, but understanding how to use data science to solve their problems, and when and to bring it in, but also when it's not good.

Donna Scarola: And that actually brings up my second trend that I see is there needs to a deeper expertise in areas of bias, People, science, behavioral science, whatever you want to call it, because where the technology will fail, and we're often seeing this... A quick example is Amazon did a test and they basically found 80% of the time they're going to hire a male for [00:24:00] an engineering position. So the machine learning basically said, "We're just not going even take female applicants. What's the point?" And they stopped this test, in their defense, which was phenomenal, but it was a great learning, which was that the machine doesn't realize that that's unethical. And so just because historical data shows that 80% of engineer applicants are male, that doesn't mean that that should be

the future. And so that's why I think the deeper expertise in people science and behavioral science is so key to merge with the need that [00:24:30] everything is data driven. Does that make sense?

Meghan M Biro: Which is basically making us more human. We're not becoming robots. Right? It's going in the other direction of we're just augmenting.

Donna Scarola: Exactly. Precisely. And then the other thing that I, the whole point of our conversation, but I think it's so true is how do we become expert marketers in what we do. So HR is becoming more specialized, especially in that human element. How do we talk to people like they're human beings, and I see it as selling them ideas and beliefs and values. [00:25:00] I say that with a positive light, but how do we do that better? Because if we don't, what happens is parts of the business end up recreating it themselves to talk to their employees, and I think in that way HR would be failing.

Meghan M Biro: I totally agree. That's like the worst thing that we could be doing, by the way. Really.

Donna Scarola: 100%.

Meghan M Biro: Donna Scarola, you rock. Thanks so much for stopping by.

Donna Scarola: Thank you Meghan. Have a good one.

Meghan M Biro: [00:25:30] Let's keep talking, everyone. Join us for our WorkTrends Twitter chat. We are going to be on the Twitters with Donna Scarola on Wednesday, August 7th at 1:30 PM Eastern, 10:30 AM Pacific, or wherever you're hanging out around this big, bad, beautiful globe of ours. Join us to talk about how HR people can think more like marketers. If you'd like to get our Twitter chat questions in advance, head on over to talentculture.com and sign up for our newsletter. It's got all those goodies for you.

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