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TRADEFLOCK

JENNIFER LOH DRYSDALE-BANKS

GLOBAL HUMAN RESOURCES DIRECTOR
GULF OIL MARINE LTD.

SPOTLIGHT
GHOSTED
AT WORK?
THE POWER
OF PAUSE

STORY OF THE MONTH TARIFFS AND TENSIONS

HOW THE U.S. TRADE POLICY IS
RESHAPING THE GLOBAL ECONOMY

MOST INSPIRING

GLOBAL HR LEADERS

2025

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EDITOR'S NOTE

BREAKING EMPLOYER ILLUSION

Across the globe, a silent paradox defines today's workforce: the world's most sought-after companies, those adorned with accolades, media buzz, and sky-high employer rankings—aren't always the best places to work. In fact, some don't even make the list. Yet top talent flocks to them, drawn by prestige rather than people experience.

It's a telling reminder: brand is what you sell, but culture is what you live.

In this special global edition, we turn the spotlight away from corporate theatre and onto the quiet revolutionaries—the HR leaders rewriting the script from within. In regions as diverse as America, Europe, Asia, the Middle East and beyond, they're confronting real issues: rising burnout masked by flexible work promises, mental health policies that are performative at best, inflated DEI statements, and a workforce craving authenticity over perks.

As hybrid work becomes the norm and generative AI redefines job landscapes, the role of HR has never been more complex—or more critical. Compensation fairness, psychological

safety, skill mobility, inclusivity, and human connection are now boardroom imperatives, not checkboxes.

The leaders we feature here aren't managing systems; they're reengineering trust. They're not chasing the next HR trend—they're anticipating the next human need. These are the architects of adaptive cultures, the navigators of the unknown, and the reason some companies remain human even at scale.

Because in this era of workplace disruption, it isn't the logo that keeps people; it is the leadership behind the scenes.

This is not just a tribute. It's a global truth: the future of work won't be built by the loudest companies but by the boldest HR leaders.

Happy reading!!!

Anamika
Anamika Sahu
Consulting Editor-in-Chief
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TRADEFLOCK'S

UPCOMING EDITIONS

10 Best Tech Leaders from Asia 2025

India's 10 Most Influential Healthcare Leaders 2025

Best Education Leaders in India 2025

10 Best CFOs in India 2025

10 Best CEOs in India 2025

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MOST INSPIRING GLOBAL HR LEADERS 2025

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Ilham Mouhriz	Vice Président and Head of HR	Capgemini (Morocco)
Jennifer Loh Drysdale-Banks	Global Human Resources Director	Gulf Oil Marine Ltd.
Mark Lewis	Head of People and Culture	Connetics
Nanthini Sathasivam	Director, Global HR Business Partnering & Projects	Plaza Premium Group
Paulo Pisano	Chief Human Resources Officer	Booking Holdings
Rochelle M. Thompson	CEO	RMThompson & Co.
Udayapriya IMBULPITIYALAGE	Group Head of Human Resources and Administration	Global Rubber Industries (Pvt) Ltd & Global Group of Companies



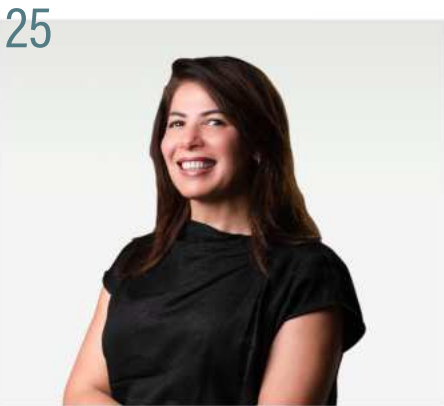
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Capgemini (Morocco)



MARK LEWIS
Head of People and Culture,
Connetics



NANTHINI SATHASIVAM
Director, Global HR Business Partnering & Projects,
Plaza Premium Group



PAULO PISANO
Chief Human Resources Officer,
Booking Holdings



ROCHELLE M. THOMPSON
CEO,
RMThompson & Co.



UDAYAPRIYA IMBULPITIYALAGE
Group Head of Human Resources
and Administration,
Global Rubber Industries (Pvt) Ltd
& Global Group of Companies

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DRYSDALE-BANKS**

Global Human Resources Director,
Gulf Oil Marine Ltd.

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+ (A Srijan Company)



Purpose Over Process

JENNIFER LOH DRYSDALE-BANKS

Global Human Resources Director, Gulf Oil Marine Ltd.

HR needs to be highly agile and versatile in today's VUCA environment, as well as culturally astute, for us to be effective partners with various departments to be truly successful



QUICK FACTS

- Country - **Singapore**
- Favourite Travel Destination - **Vietnam** (One can live a fulfilling life in Vietnam without breaking the bank)
- Favourite Cuisine - **Anything with spice** (All types of spices especially chilli spice - the hotter the better)
- Favourite Book - **The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde** (I love mysteries, thrillers, complexities, and anything controversial)

Having started her career in sales and marketing, Jennifer Loh Drysdale-Banks' journey to becoming the Global Human Resources Director at Gulf Oil Marine Ltd is anything but conventional. Her transition from the fast-paced world of sales to HR may seem like an unexpected shift, but for Jennifer, it was the natural progression of a desire to make a deeper impact on people and organisational culture. While sales and marketing provided her with the thrill of immediate business results, she found herself drawn to shaping the long-term development of individuals and teams, a passion that led her to HR.

What sets Jennifer apart in her HR leadership is her ability to merge her background in sales and marketing with HR strategies. She approaches HR through a business lens, understanding stakeholder mindsets and effectively communicating across functions. This perspective has allowed her to view HR as more than just an administrative function; it's a strategic enabler of organisational growth and transformation.

Jennifer's defining moment came during a project in which she worked closely with the HR team on change management. It was there that she realised the power of culture, leadership, and communication in driving successful transformation, sparking her full commitment to HR. Since then, she has equipped herself with further education, certifications, and hands-on experience to evolve Gulf Oil Marine's HR function into a strategic partner within the company.

Among her proudest achievements at Gulf Oil Marine, Jennifer led an organisational change

where she transformed a compliance-driven culture into a people-powered engine, where employees were not just managed, they were activated, by bringing them all together through various and regular open communications with HR and leaders, investing in employees' professional development & holistic wellbeing, and implementing scholarships for high performers. As such, employees were unleashed and empowered. The result? Engagement soared, performance escalated, all of which led to the business skyrocketing to a level which the company has never accomplished before ever. All these were accomplished not by pushing harder but by creating a culture where people could bring their boldest, most capable selves to work. More than anything, Jennifer is committed to building a culture where every employee feels valued, enabled, and heard, regardless of their culture, background or location. Through her leadership, Gulf Oil Marine continues to thrive, guided by the vision of a people-first strategy.

In this candid interview with TradeFlock, Jennifer speaks more about her work.

Q How do you balance business goals with people priorities?

That's the essence of strategic HR. It's not either-or — it's about alignment. I always start with the business strategy: Where are we going? What capabilities do we need? Then, I work backwards to design people strategies that enable that growth — whether it's workforce planning, talent development, or cultural alignment.

At the same time, people are not just “resources”. They are humans with aspirations, fears, and potential. So, we ensure that policies and programmes reflect purpose, flexibility, and empathy. The key is to build trust — when people trust leadership, they go the extra mile.

Q What’s your approach to building an effective HR team and function?

It begins with a mindset. I look for HR professionals who are not just process-orientated but also business-savvy and people-centric. The best HR teams are those that ask, “How does this help the business succeed?” and “How does this impact our people experience?”

I’ve also focused on upskilling and reskilling. HR is evolving fast — data analytics, digital tools, and hybrid work models that require new competencies. We’ve invested in training, cross-functional projects, and mentoring to facilitate our HR team to be progressive. The same is also implemented with other departments, enabling Gulf Oil Marine to be future-ready in its continuous evolution.

Finally, I believe in collaboration over silos. HR doesn’t exist in isolation. HR needs to be highly agile and versatile in today’s VUCA environment, as well as culturally astute, for us to be effective partners with various departments to be truly successful.

Q Gulf Oil Marine operates globally. How do you ensure consistency in people practices across cultures?

That’s a great question. We operate across numerous countries, so cultural sensitivity is critical. As such, the ‘one size fits all’ approach logically does not work for us. Rather, we focus on shared principles — transparency, inclusion, and accountability.

We localise the practices where needed. For example, career development might look different in China versus Europe, and benefits in India may differ from those in the UK. We encourage our leaders and managers to bring in cultural context while staying true to the company’s core values.

What unites us is a shared purpose and aligned leadership behaviour.

Q What’s your view on the evolving role of HR, especially post-pandemic?

The pandemic elevated HR to the C-suite like never before. We became central to business continuity, employee wellbeing, remote work, and culture building. And that spotlight hasn’t dimmed.

Today, HR is expected to be a strategist, a mentor, a data analyst, and a storyteller — all

at once. The future of HR is dynamic, tech-enabled, and yet deeply human.

I also think there’s a stronger emphasis now on purpose and mental wellbeing. People want more than a pay cheque — they want meaning, tractability, and connection. Organisations that understand this will thrive.

Q As younger generations like Gen Z enter the workforce, how are you managing shifting workplace expectations across growth markets?

Managing a multigenerational workforce is about aligning diverse expectations while valuing what each group brings to the table. At Gulf Oil Marine and in my previous roles, I’ve led teams with up to four generations working together. While Gen Z is often labelled as wanting quick wins or constant praise, I’ve found these assumptions limiting. What they truly seek is mentorship, growth, and purposeful work.

Being from Gen X, I’ve learnt that a top-down “just follow” style no longer works. So, we engaged with younger talent early through campus recruitment and open conversations. We also equipped our managers with coaching skills and encouraged hybrid work models that trust employees to deliver results with discipline.

In my previous life, one Gen Z employee told me, “This company invests in my growth, and that gives me purpose”—and that’s the impact we aim for. We’ve fostered cross-generational dialogues and built a culture of trust, empowerment, and continuous learning. That’s how we’ve turned generational differences into a strength rather than a challenge.

Q How do you empower your team to drive the initiatives globally?

With a lean HR team of just five people, including myself, overseeing more than 12 countries, my role is to focus on the big picture—aligning HR strategy with business goals for tangible results. That starts with building a capable team who understand what strategic HR truly means.

Once that foundation is in place, I provide the vision and direction—but I don’t micromanage. I tell my managers, “Here’s where we need to go—now show me how you’ll get us there.” They come back with their own concepts, frameworks, and business cases. It empowers them to lead, think critically, and build solutions tailored to regional needs.

In doing so, they learn to manage across cultures, own their strategies, and drive impact

independently. I provide the roadmap—they fill in the journey. And that’s what makes it scalable and sustainable.

Q Was there a particular book, mentor, or experience that significantly shaped your leadership journey?

Not just one, but several leaders have influenced me over time. I’ve drawn inspiration from visionaries like Dave Ulrich, whose HR models continue to shape global practices, and Simon

Sinek for his insights on purposeful leadership. Jack Welch’s bold approach to performance management also left an impression—it taught me the importance of maintaining high standards in a sustainable business. And of course, Steve Jobs, for his clarity of vision and innovation.

Rather than follow any one model, I draw the traits that resonate with me and adapt them to my own values. That’s helped me become a leader who can both drive business results and inspire people.

Q Being a global HR director comes with immense responsibility. How do you find balance or unwind in such a dynamic industry?

For me, balance isn’t about fixed hours, it’s about fulfilment. My schedule is intense, but I genuinely enjoy investing in myself. I don’t have children and lead a fairly independent life, which gives me the space to focus on continuous growth.

Last year, I pursued accreditations like SHRM-SCP, IHRP-SP, and Harrison Assessment Profiler, as well as Luma Human-Centred Design Thinking Practitioner — often studying late into the night. It’s not just about adding credentials; it’s about becoming a more profound HR leader and coach who can influence others on their respective paths towards success, translating to constantly evolving and sustainable business performance. This kind of personal development energises me.

Of course, I do make time for coffee with friends and a social life, but self-improvement is what truly fuels me. That’s how I stay balanced—by doing what brings me purpose and joy.

Q What are your professional aspirations for the next five years?

In the next five years, I aim to step into a Chief Human Resources Officer or Chief People Officer role. It’s not about the title—it’s about expanding my ability to influence how people and business strategies intersect.

At Gulf Oil Marine, I’m already steering a performance-driven and purpose-led culture through diverse strategies across all levels, which have resulted in our currently thriving business. But my goal is to evolve from initiatives to a more significant measurable impact—where HR plays a critical role in business outcomes and has a permanent seat at the decision-making table. I want to enable organisations to see that HR is not just a mere support function; HR is an imperative strategic driver of the success of every business. ♦

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Editor's Pick

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AI, INTUITION, AND THE FUTURE OF CEO SUCCESSION

In the high-stakes world of corporate leadership, the departure of a CEO can send a shockwave through an organisation. Yet, despite the critical importance of seamless leadership transitions, many companies remain ill-prepared. According to a Harvard Business Review study, poorly managed CEO succession can result in the erosion of nearly \$1 trillion in market value annually across the S&P 1500 companies.

Traditionally, succession planning has been a reactive process, often initiated when a leader announces their departure. This approach leaves organisations scrambling, leading to rushed decisions and potential mismatches. However, a quiet revolution is underway. Forward-thinking HR teams are leveraging artificial intelligence (AI) and human intuition to build robust and multi-layered succession pipelines that are proactive, data-driven, and aligned with future organisational needs.

The Rise of AI in Succession Planning

AI is transforming the landscape of succession planning by providing predictive analytics and insights into employee performance, potential and readiness. Tools like Spire and Copilot for Talent, integrate AI to collect and analyse employee skill data, enabling organisations to identify high-potential leaders early and tailor development plans accordingly.

Moreover, AI facilitates the management of succession pipelines by automating the tracking and monitoring of potential successors' progress. By centralising data on candidates' performance, readiness, and career aspirations, AI enables organisations to maintain a robust pipeline of talent for key leadership positions.

Building a Future-Ready Leadership Pipeline

Effective succession planning requires a shift from a reactive to a proactive approach. This involves identifying and developing potential leaders well in advance of a vacancy arising. According to AIHR, succession management ensures a steady pipeline of capable and engaged talent is in place to fill key positions, keeping the organisation resilient and future-ready.

KEY STRATEGIES INCLUDE:

Identifying High-Potential Talent: Using AI to analyse performance data and identify employees with leadership potential.

Personalised Development Plans: Tailoring development programs to address individual strengths and areas for growth.

Mentorship and Coaching: Facilitating knowledge transfer and skill development through structured mentorship programs.

Regular Review and Adjustment: Continuously monitoring and updating succession plans to reflect changes in organisational strategy and personnel.

The traditional model of CEO succession is no longer sufficient in today's dynamic business environment. By leveraging AI and human intuition, HR teams are pioneering a new approach to succession planning that is proactive, data-driven, and aligned with organisational goals. This transformation ensures that companies are not only prepared for leadership changes but are also cultivating a pipeline of future-ready leaders poised to drive long-term success. ♦



Shaping Business Success through
People Innovation

ANAM IRFAN

Chief People Officer,
Bytespark.ai

With a career built at the intersection of business transformation and human capital innovation, Anam Irfan stands out as a next-generation HR leader. As Partner & Chief People Officer at Bytespark.ai, she draws from over 16 years of experience with global giants like Majid Al Futtaim (Carrefour), ENEC, and Tenaris, shaping organizations where people strategy drives business success.

Anam's passion lies in redefining HR, not just managing it. She excels in architecting ecosystems that deliver tangible impact, from leading total rewards transformations for 37,000 employees to embedding digital-first HR practices that enhance business agility. Known for her bold, data-driven, people-centered solutions, Anam fosters growth, resilience, and innovation.

Her leadership philosophy blends empathy, financial/commercial insight, and an unwavering commitment to transformation as an ongoing discipline. Whether managing M&A integrations or future-proofing cultures, her work is defined by strategic vision and executional excellence.

Born in Karachi and raised in the UAE, Anam combines a global perspective with strong local roots. Holding a master's degree in international management from the UK, she remains a dedicated lifelong learner. Outside of work, she finds balance in reading, writing, and spending time with her family, including her son, who inspires her sense of purpose.

At Bytespark.ai, Anam is co-creating the future of work, ensuring innovation, human connection, and business success are

seamlessly integrated. With TradeFlock, she discusses more about her work and life.

Q What's one bold decision you made that other doubted but turned out right?

At Majid Al Futtaim, my boldest decision was reimagining how digital talent grows and develops. When everyone else followed rigid career ladders, we took a radical approach with our eCommerce and digital teams, especially engineering and product.

We abandoned conventional thinking and built a modular career framework where employees choose their own journey, managerial, specialist, or project-focused. Many doubted this shift, arguing that traditional structures provided clarity and predictability. I was convinced that real transformation required more than incremental changes.

The sceptics were silenced by the results: employees gained unprecedented clarity, direction, and ownership over their professional development. A powerful growth mindset surged through our teams as the conversation shifted from "What should my next title be?" to "How can I create meaningful impact?"

Looking back, I'm proud we stopped asking what a title should be and started asking what truly serves our business, talent, and future. Sometimes the boldest leadership means questioning familiar answers.

Q Which HR practice is outdated, and what would you replace it with?

The traditional annual performance review is obsolete. In today's fast-paced, hybrid, and skill-



QUICK FACTS

- Country - UAE
- Favourite Travel Destination - Maldives & Turkey
- Favourite Cuisine - Flavors of the subcontinent
- Favourite Book - Surrounded by Idiots - a book that explains four types of human behavior and forms the basis for understanding DISC profiles (Dominance, Influence, Steadiness, Conscientiousness).

fluid world, it no longer captures the dynamic evolution of talent or business priorities. I'd replace it with a real-time, AI-powered talent intelligence platform.

This system would continuously collect feedback, analyze productivity trends, and forecast skill gaps, aligning with both personal growth and business objectives. HR should empower people to evolve as quickly as the businesses they support, making performance continuous, contextual, and personalized for a more agile workforce.

Q How do you design rewards that reflect performance, purpose, and potential?

For me, rewards should reflect not just past performance but future potential. At MAFR, I redefined rewards by incorporating impact metrics, values alignment, skill growth, and future readiness. We shifted from linear career ladders to career lattices, recognizing initiative in cross-functional roles and leadership potential. The message was clear: rewards are investment in growth. This philosophy now drives our solutions at Bytespark.ai, helping organizations uncover and nurture talent through technology that goes beyond just a CV.

Q What makes the UAE a unique innovation hub, and what can global HR leaders learn from it?

The UAE is a unique testing ground for innovation, offering a hyper-diverse, fast-paced, and digital ecosystem. Its ability to adopt new work models like gig work and AI in HR at an unmatched speed makes it a global benchmark.

HR leaders worldwide can learn from the UAE's balance between agility and compliance, diversity and cohesion, and ambition and inclusion. In the UAE, people innovation isn't just an aspiration, it's essential for survival, shaping the future of work.

Q What's next for you, and what's the next mountain you want to climb?

After my journey at Majid Al Futtaim, I've embraced entrepreneurship as Partner & Chief People Officer at Bytespark.ai, a recruitment platform reshaping hiring with speed, intelligence, and heart. My belief in HR as a catalyst for transformation is now being built from the ground up, humanizing hiring through technology.



For me, it's always been about people. Tech is the enabler; strategy is the map, but it's the human story that drives the journey. If I can help someone see a path they didn't know they had, that's the real win.

Professionally, I aim to create solutions that help organizations grow with purpose and individuals with clarity. Personally, I plan to stay curious and bold. I'm also launching a podcast to share insights on rewards, culture, e-commerce, and AI in HR, inspiring real change. ♦

GHOSTED AT WORK?

How Communication Gaps Are Breaking Hybrid Teams?

Forget haunted houses. The scariest ghost today lives in your inbox, or rather, doesn't. You send a Slack message to your boss. You follow up with an email. Maybe even drop a casual ping. Nothing. Silence. And just like that, you're "ghosted."

This isn't an awkward millennial dating term anymore, it's now a full-blown workplace phenomenon. As hybrid and remote work continue to redefine how we collaborate, a new kind of emotional burnout is rising: communication anxiety, the creeping fear of being ignored, misunderstood, or forgotten.

And this time, HR is donning the cape.

Anxiety on the Rise

According to a 2024 study by PwC, over 46% of hybrid workers reported feeling "frequently anxious" about communication delays from

leadership, fearing it reflects disinterest or dissatisfaction. What used to be a casual hallway chat now feels like shouting into a void of blue ticks and "typing..." indicators.

McKinsey & Company recently found that lack of clear communication from leadership was among the top three drivers of employee disengagement in a hybrid work environment. Couple that with Microsoft's 2023 Work Trend Index, which reported a 252% increase in meetings and digital messages per employee since the pandemic began—and you've got the perfect storm.

As the volume of digital interaction skyrockets, actual clarity and connection plummet.

When 'Always On' Turns into 'Always Anxious'

Hybrid work was supposed to offer flexibility. Instead,

it often demands constant availability. Employees across the globe are reporting "availability paranoia"—a term coined by researchers at MIT Sloan, which describes the stress that remote workers feel when they're not instantly responsive, fearing they will be labelled as lazy or disengaged.

A Harvard Business Review article (2023) noted that employees check work tools over 75 times a day, often outside working hours. What's worse? This "hyperconnectivity" often fails to correlate with improved productivity, but is instead directly linked to burnout, anxiety, and attrition.

As per a Bain & Company 2024 workplace study, over 1 in 3 employees said they've considered quitting in the past year due to feeling "chronically misaligned" with leadership communications, or lack thereof.

The Psychological Toll of Leadership Silence

Beyond just an absence, leadership silence is a message. And employees are interpreting it through a mental magnifying glass. The silence of a manager isn't perceived as "busy" but as "indifference" or "disapproval." This phenomenon has a name: communication ambiguity bias, which refers to our brain's tendency to assume the worst in the absence of clear feedback.

The Journal of Applied Psychology found that teams with inconsistent or delayed managerial feedback had 27% lower engagement scores and were 43% more likely to see interpersonal conflicts among peers. The result? Employees often feel isolated, undervalued, and uncertain about their performance, even when they're doing excellent work.

How HR Can Rewrite the Communication Culture?

HR is no longer just a support function; it's a strategic compass guiding how humans connect in a digital-first workplace. The best HR teams are no longer

just plugging communication gaps, they're designing new ecosystems of engagement.

Reintroducing the Human in Communication

Top companies are encouraging what they call "video-first empathy." Instead of endless emails, HR pushes managers to use face-to-face (or screen-to-screen) time to connect on a personal level. Tools like Donut (Slack plugin for casual catchups) and Loom (asynchronous video updates) are being used to make communication more human again.

Training Leaders for Asynchronous Empathy

According to Gartner's 2024 Future of Work Report, 70% of digital leaders struggle with tone and emotional clarity in written communication. HR is bridging the gap through microlearning modules that teach digital empathy, responding quickly, acknowledging receipt, and even using the right emojis.

Setting Communication Norms

More companies now have a "response time SLA" (Service

Level Agreement) built into team norms, such as "respond to all internal emails within 24 hours" or "acknowledge feedback, even if a full response takes time." These subtle shifts rebuild trust.

How Companies Are Doing It Right

At GitLab, a fully remote company with over 1,800 employees across 60+ countries, communication is not an afterthought; it's the backbone. Their public handbook outlines expected response times, communication tools, and even guides how managers should give recognition asynchronously.

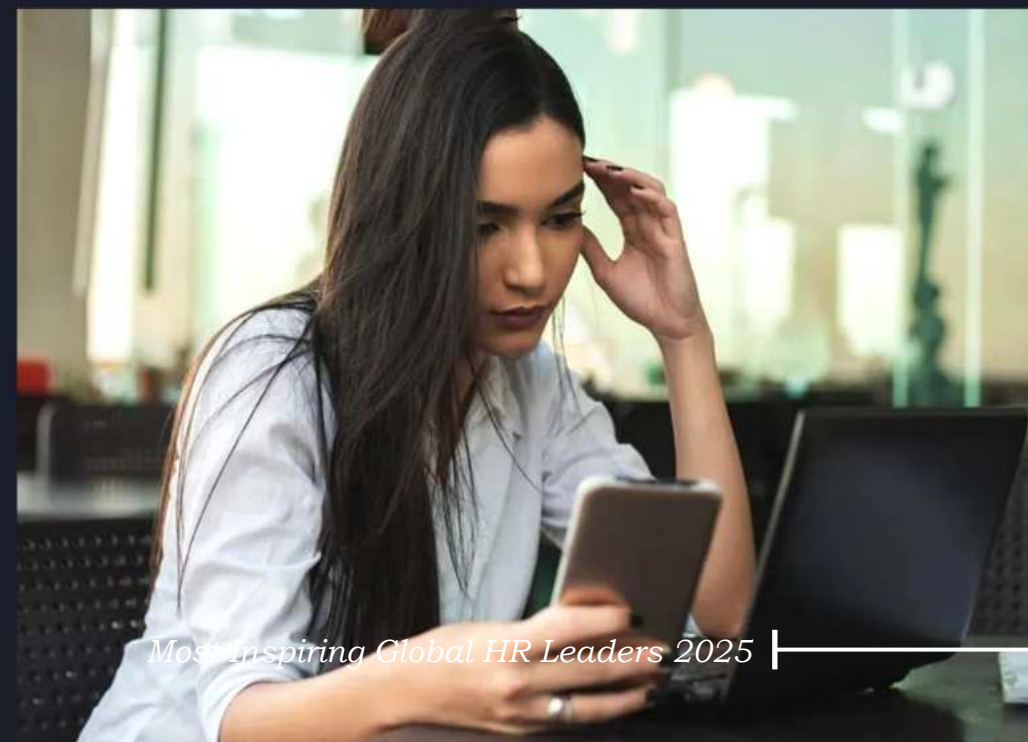
Closer to home, Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) rolled out its "digital dialogues" initiative, where mid-level managers hold weekly, open, informal chats with their teams. No agenda, just presence.

And at Unilever, HR launched "Virtual Watercooler" sessions, a space for unstructured, spontaneous team banter. The goal is to recreate the serendipitous connections of an office hallway digitally.

From Ghosted to Engaged: What's Next?

As we lean further into hybrid work models, the question isn't if communication anxiety will rise—it's what we'll do to solve it. The future of work depends not just on bandwidth and Zoom links, but on emotionally intelligent leadership, intentional HR strategies, and tools that connect not just devices, but people.

Because sometimes, all it takes is a timely, "Got your message. Let's talk soon." ♦





*Shaping HR Cultures That Inspire
and Drive Growth*

ANTIGONI PAVLOU

Head- Human Resources

Adapting HR strategies across industries as diverse as consulting, retail, real estate, and shipping demands more than expertise. It requires vision, agility, and a profound understanding of organisational transformation. Antigoni Pavlou is a leader who delivers exactly that.

With over 20 years of experience, she has had the privilege of serving in multiple industries, both as an in-house HR leader and as a consultant, setting up and heading HR departments from the ground up. Her career has spanned the full spectrum of HR, including onboarding, performance management, employee relations, engagement, and large-scale transformation. She believes that while HR principles remain the foundation, their execution must be tailored to an organisation's culture, strategy, and people.

In her previous employments, Antigoni ensured that HR is not just a function but a driving force behind business resilience and growth. She worked closely with top leadership to align HR with corporate strategy, fostering a high-performance culture, innovation, and a strong customer-centric approach. The biggest shift in her mindset had come from the realisation that organisational transformation is no longer optional but is necessary for survival and long-term success.

A champion of HR modernisation, she integrated BambooHR to drive data-backed decision-making and enhance workforce analytics. Under her leadership, the company achieved the prestigious Gold-level Investors in People accreditation. One can easily say that for Antigoni, HR is about empowering people, shaping visionary leadership, and ensuring organisations thrive in an ever-evolving world. How? Let's read here.

Q What does "employee experience" mean to you, and how do you measure its success beyond engagement scores?

For me, 'employee experience' starts from the minute you talk to a potential candidate and either you finally recruit the employee or not, or he has left the organisation after a certain period; he goes out into the market and labels his experience with you with words such as trusting, confident, human-centric, guidance, coaching, empathy, and being listened to. This has been the best reward as an HR leader. For me, the best measurement would be a successful culture that speaks for itself day in and day out. A culture of educated professionals, striving for a people-centred approach and professional growth for employees.

Q What cultural blind spots do HR leaders overlook in a global workforce, and how do you address them?

Managing a diverse, global workforce is a giant responsibility. It is critical for an HR leader to know the diversity of its employees in all locations, whether this is ethnicity, religion, or backgrounds. A simple example is when the workplace closes for the Christmas holidays and the majority of Christians can celebrate their religious holidays. What happens though when Ramadan comes around and Muslim employees may not have accommodations made for them?

Policies have to be written up very carefully in order to recognise the diversity of culture among its employees. These should include clothing expectations, even food ethnocentrism if the organisation offers meals to its employees. Cultivating this cultural agility by maintaining an open-minded outlook towards culture and striving to be sensitive to different perspectives, choosing our words and reactions carefully. Most importantly, it is to explore these cultural norms and practices. Knowledge is king!



QUICK FACTS

- Country - Cyprus
- Your go-to stress buster: Exercise and meditation
- A book that changed your perspective: **Atomic Habits—James Clear**
- Your dream vacation destination: Caribbean
- If not HR, your alternate career choice: Psychology of criminal minds/serial killers

Q How do you modernise HR in a traditionally rigid industry?

This is a huge challenge in any rigid and traditional framework, and the trick lies in the mindset. And it is not so much about deciding and implementing the modern HR practices, but how you make your way around in introducing, presenting and enhancing these practices to be accepted. And you start with your top leaders who by now have trusted your initiatives and have seen results and have managed to convince them by portraying the benefits to the organisation and aligning these with the company strategy.

This is the biggest win-win of all. And with their support, you move to the next level of leaders/department heads, and you start a process of involvement: what do you think? What more can we do? I suggest...and you slowly embed these practices through brainstorming, communication and indicating what you wish to achieve and the end result. Resilience will then start hitting lower levels.

Q What passion defines you beyond work?

After my love for HR, I would say my next passion is spending time with children. Precious time with these little people is so rewarding and reminds you that there is still innocence, purity and easy communication in this challenging, to say the least, world we live in today. You can have lovely conversations with them, and just by playing or reading to them, it is wonderful how much information they absorb and how their little minds can develop. I guess it is applying my human skills even to these little ones and watching the way they react that is intriguing. ♦



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Post-Perks Culture: What Will Truly Drive Retention in 2025?

SWETA SINGH Director- Talent Acquisition – APAC, Material+ (A Srijan Company)



Once upon a time, company culture was measured in bean bags, baristas, and bottomless snack bars. But as we step deeper into 2025, the definition of what makes a workplace worth staying at has radically changed.

Perks once symbolized a great place to work. Today, they're just the packaging. What truly matters now is the substance inside—a culture that supports, empowers, and inspires. And in a post-perks era, retention is no longer about the cool, it's about the core.

The Evolution of Retention

In the early 2010s, culture was defined by surface-level experiences. A sleek office could signal innovation. A dog-friendly policy meant “fun.” But the pandemic years flipped the script.

■ **Pre-2020:** Perks like nap pods, free lunches, and office games symbolized “great culture.”

■ **2020–2022:** The pandemic shifted focus to flexibility and wellbeing.

■ **2023–2024:** Perks alone no longer woo talent; people want substance and alignment.

“In 2025, the best perk is purpose”.

Now talent is asking harder questions:

■ “Do I feel psychologically safe here?”

■ “Am I growing?”

■ “Does this company live its values—or just write them on the wall?”

■ “Does my work have impact?”

The answer to those questions? That's the new currency of retention.

What Employees Actually Want in 2025? Psychological Safety

■ Freedom to speak up and be vulnerable without fear of repercussion.

■ Teams with high psychological safety outperform on innovation and resilience.

Autonomy + Flexibility

■ Not just remote work, but control over schedules, work styles, and deliverables.

■ Trust-based environments are retaining top performers.

■ **Growth & Internal Mobility**
■ Clear paths to reskilling opportunities, and cross-functional movement.

People stay where they feel they can evolve.

Values-Based Leadership

■ Leaders who live the values, communicate transparently, and show empathy.

■ Authenticity from the top down is now non-negotiable.

Connectedness, Even in Hybrid Settings

■ Purposeful team rituals, inclusive collaboration, and community-building matter more than proximity.

■ Digital-first doesn't mean culture-last.

Retention = Belonging + Impact

The formula is simple, but not easy. Employees stay where they feel:

■ **They belong.** Identity, inclusion, and psychological safety matter more than ever.

■ **They make an impact.** People want their work to contribute to something bigger.

Final Thought: Culture Is the New Contract

Perks can attract talent—but only **culture retains** it. Because in a world that's changed so much, the ultimate perk is this: **working somewhere that actually lives its values.** ♦



Building the Heartbeat of Admiral Group

BERENGERE PETER

Group Head of People Experience, Admiral Group LLC

In the ever-evolving landscape of corporate leadership, where adaptability and empathy are as crucial as strategic acumen, Berengere Peter stands out as a paragon of modern HR leadership. As the Group Head of People Experience at Admiral Group PLC, a FTSE 100 financial services company, she has seamlessly blended her diverse experiences to foster a culture of inclusivity, innovation, and employee engagement.

A Foundation in Finance and Consulting

Berengere's professional journey commenced in the financial sector, where she honed her analytical skills as a Financial Auditor at PwC in Paris. This role provided her with a solid foundation in financial principles and corporate governance. Her academic credentials, including a master's degree in Business Administration and Management from Emlyon Business School, further equipped her with the knowledge to navigate complex business environments.

Transitioning from finance to human resources, Berengere joined Hay Group, a global management consulting firm specialising in organisational strategy and human capital development. Here,

she advised clients on reward systems, talent management, organisational design, and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives. Her tenure at Hay Group, and subsequently at Korn Ferry following its acquisition of Hay Group in 2015, saw her rise to the position of Partner and Technology Market Leader Advisory for the EMEA region. In these roles, she provided strategic guidance to technology firms, helping them scale their workforces and adapt to the rapidly changing digital landscape.

Transforming People's Experience at Admiral Group

In October 2020, Berengere took on the role of Group Head of People Experience at Admiral Group PLC. Her appointment came at a pivotal time, as organisations worldwide grappled with the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Berengere's leadership was instrumental in navigating these challenges, ensuring that Admiral's employees remained engaged, supported, and connected despite the disruptions.

Under her guidance, Admiral Group has continued its impressive streak of being ranked among the UK's Best Workplaces™ for over 20 consecutive years. Berengere attributes this achievement to the company's unwavering commitment to employee satisfaction, open communication, and continuous improvement. Initiatives like 'Tea Parties,' where employees can share feedback directly with leadership, and the 'You Said, We Did' approach, which ensures that employee feedback leads to tangible actions, have been central to maintaining a positive workplace culture.

Addressing HR Challenges with Strategic Foresight

Berengere's tenure at Admiral has been marked by her proactive approach to addressing HR challenges. She has been a strong advocate for integrating DEI principles into the company's core values, recognising that a diverse and inclusive workforce is essential for innovation and long-term success. Her multicultural agility, developed through living abroad and managing global teams, has been invaluable in fostering an inclusive environment that respects and celebrates diversity.

Moreover, Berengere has emphasised the importance of aligning HR strategies with business objectives. By positioning HR as a key business enabler, she has ensured that talent management, organisational design, and employee engagement initiatives directly contribute to Admiral's growth and competitiveness in the financial services sector.

A Strategic HR Leader with Transformative Power

Berengere Peter's professional journey exemplifies the transformative power of strategic HR leadership. Her ability to blend financial acumen, consulting expertise, and a deep understanding of human capital has enabled her to drive meaningful change at Admiral Group. As organisations continue to navigate the complexities of the modern business environment, leaders like Berengere, who prioritise people experience and organisational culture, will be instrumental in shaping resilient and adaptive enterprises. ♦

Under her guidance, Admiral Group has continued its impressive streak of being ranked among the UK's Best Workplaces™ for over 20 consecutive years.



Leadership Lessons from

DEIRDRE O'BRIEN

Humanising Scale at Apple

In an era where technology often outpaces human connection, Deirdre O'Brien, Apple's Senior Vice President of Retail and former Chief People Officer, exemplifies leadership that harmonises innovation with empathy. With over three decades at Apple, O'Brien has been instrumental in shaping the company's culture and customer experience, ensuring that as Apple scales, it remains deeply human-centric.

Cultivate Culture as a Strategic Asset

O'Brien's tenure underscores the importance of culture in driving innovation. She has been pivotal in fostering an environment where employees are encouraged to do their best work, aligning with Apple's ethos of excellence. By overseeing functions such as Apple University and talent management, she ensures that the company's values are not just preserved but actively cultivated.

Lesson to Learn

Don't treat company culture as background noise — actively shape and protect it as a driver of innovation and excellence.

Integrate Retail and People for Cohesive Experiences

Holding dual roles in retail and human resources, O'Brien bridges the gap between employee experience and customer satisfaction. Her leadership ensures that the insights from retail inform HR strategies and vice versa, creating a cohesive experience for both employees and customers. This integration is evident in Apple's retail spaces, which are designed to be more than just stores—they are community hubs that reflect the company's commitment to innovation and inclusivity.

Lesson to Learn

Bridge internal (HR) and external (customer) experiences to create a seamless and cohesive brand.

Embrace Diversity and Inclusion Authentically

O'Brien's journey of coming out at Apple highlights her commitment to authenticity and inclusivity. She has been a driving force behind Apple's diversity initiatives, ensuring that the workplace is welcoming and supportive for all. Her leadership demonstrates that embracing diversity is not only the right thing to do but also a strategic advantage that drives creativity and innovation.

Lesson to Learn

Be open, visible, and committed to diversity — it builds trust and drives performance.

Adapt Retail Strategies to Evolving Consumer Needs

Under O'Brien's guidance, Apple's retail strategy has evolved to meet changing consumer behaviours. She has overseen the expansion of Apple's retail presence, including new stores in India and Malaysia, and has adapted store designs to enhance customer engagement. Her approach ensures that Apple's retail spaces remain relevant and responsive to customer needs.

Lesson to Learn

Continuously evolve your retail or service model to stay relevant to your audience.

Lead with Empathy and Teamwork

O'Brien's leadership style is deeply rooted in empathy and collaboration. She values the importance of being a team player and believes in the power of collective effort. Her emphasis on walking meetings and open communication fosters a culture where employees feel valued and heard, leading to higher engagement and productivity.

Lesson to Learn

Practice empathy and collaboration — walk the talk, listen deeply, and be present with your team.

Champion In-Person Collaboration

While acknowledging the benefits of remote work, O'Brien advocates for the irreplaceable value of in-person collaboration. She believes that face-to-face interactions enhance creativity and problem-solving, and she strives to find the right balance between remote flexibility and in-office synergy.

Lesson to Learn

Recognise the power of physical presence for innovation, while still valuing flexibility.

Invest in Community Engagement

O'Brien's vision extends beyond the confines of Apple's offices and stores. She champions initiatives that connect Apple with local communities, such as educational programs and partnerships with underrepresented groups. These efforts not only enrich the community but also reinforce Apple's role as a socially responsible leader.

Lesson to Learn

Great leadership doesn't stop at company walls — uplift local communities to build shared value.

Leading with Heart and Vision

Deirdre O'Brien's leadership at Apple exemplifies how empathy, inclusivity, and

strategic thinking can coexist to drive a company forward. Her holistic approach ensures that as Apple continues to innovate and expand, it does so without losing sight of the people who make it all possible. In a world where technology often takes centre stage, O'Brien reminds us that at the heart of every great company are its people. ♦



Navigating through diverse sectors like automotive, hospitality, client relations, consulting, and technology, Ilham Mouhriz has become a dynamic HR leader in Morocco with a unique ability to align people strategy with business outcomes. As Vice President of Human Resources at Capgemini Morocco, she combines her varied experience to drive innovative, employee-centric solutions that not only enhance business performance but also foster a culture of growth and adaptability.

In the automotive industry, Ilham mastered precision and efficiency, skills she later applied to the fast-paced, agile hospitality sector. Her experience in client relations deepened her expertise in talent acquisition and retention, allowing her to create programmes that addressed high turnover and boosted employee engagement. Ilham's consulting background sharpened her strategic vision, while her work in technology enabled her to embrace digital transformation and leverage HR solutions to improve productivity and satisfaction.

With this wealth of knowledge, Ilham thrives in dynamic environments, constantly optimising HR strategies to meet business needs. At Capgemini Morocco, she continues to reshape the future of work, ensuring HR remains central to every business decision and driving organisational success through a people-first approach. TradeFlock explores more about her work in this exclusive interview.

What was the biggest HR challenge at Foundever Africa, and how did you overcome it?

Leading HR across four diverse countries—Morocco, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, and Egypt—was both a rewarding and challenging experience. Each country's unique cultural and legal landscape required a tailored approach to HR strategies, which meant balancing local nuances while maintaining consistency across the board.

Building Agile, Inclusive, and Future-Ready Workforces

ILHAM MOUHRIZ

Vice President and Head of HR, Capgemini (Morocco)

However, the true test came with the COVID-19 pandemic. It revealed the gaps in our digital infrastructure and highlighted the need for rapid transformation. I seized this challenge as an opportunity, accelerating the digital shift by implementing remote work policies and advanced HR systems. The result? Not only did we ensure business continuity, but we also enhanced team productivity and resilience, turning adversity into a triumph for the organisation.

How does HR at Capgemini Morocco balance innovation with human-centred values?

At Capgemini Morocco, we blend technical innovation with human-centred values by offering training programmes that develop both hard and soft skills. Our flexible work models, competitive benefits, and focus on personal growth ensure that our HR practices foster innovation while prioritising employee well-being and values.



QUICK FACTS

- Country - Morocco
- Your go-to stress buster: Asia
- Favourite Cuisine: Italian
- Favourite Book: Réveille-toi et sois heureux, Allal Bennani

How do you align global Capgemini values with local talent dynamics in Morocco?

We work closely with universities and educational institutions to ensure our training programmes remain relevant to the rapidly evolving market needs. By adapting to the expectations of Generation Z, we offer flexible work models and continuous personal and professional development opportunities. Our focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion

fosters an environment where all employees feel respected and valued. This approach allows us to cultivate a cohesive workforce that aligns global Capgemini values with the local talent dynamics, ensuring we remain agile in the face of technological change while upholding a strong cultural foundation.

What are the three core beliefs you always uphold as an HR leader?

As an HR leader, there are three fundamental beliefs I hold unwaveringly: inclusivity, innovation, and integrity.



First, inclusivity isn't just a buzzword for me; it's a cornerstone of leadership. I am committed to building environments where every individual, especially women, feels truly valued and has an equal shot at success. This means driving initiatives that actively break down barriers, like mentorship programmes, diversity-focused recruitment, and promoting flexible work policies. It's about creating spaces where everyone, regardless of gender or background, has the opportunity to flourish.

Next, innovation is the lifeblood of progress. In a world that's constantly evolving, staying ahead of the curve is essential. I believe in harnessing technology, embracing flexible work solutions, and constantly pushing the boundaries of what's possible. Innovation means not just adapting to change but actively shaping it, ensuring we remain agile, competitive, and responsive to both the needs of the business and the workforce.

Finally, integrity is non-negotiable. Leading with honesty, transparency, and ethical practices is the foundation of trust. Whether it's in recruitment, performance management, or everyday communication, I ensure that every decision is made with the utmost integrity. It's this consistency that builds a strong, credible culture where people trust the leadership and feel safe to contribute their best.

These principles guide my every action, ensuring that HR not only supports the business but drives real, lasting change.

What is one bold innovation you introduced that significantly elevated the employee experience?

One innovation I'm particularly proud of is the transformation of our recruitment process through bold, creative campaigns at Foundever (formerly Sitel). We ditched traditional methods and introduced virtual, interactive experiences that piqued candidates' interest and highlighted our unique culture. This wasn't just about attracting talent; it was about creating excitement.

Simultaneously, we embraced "fun management", integrating playful activities and social events into the workplace to foster camaraderie and drive employee satisfaction. We also redefined internal communication, empowering employees to share their stories and become true brand ambassadors. This holistic approach has supercharged employee engagement, strengthened our culture, and made a lasting impact on the employee lifecycle. ♦

THE POWER OF PAUSE

BACK IN FEW MIN

There's a strange irony in the modern workplace, we glorify hustle, reward long hours, and praise people who "power through". But while the coffee-fuelled grind might seem heroic, the real productivity superheroes are often the ones who step away from their desks. That's right—the most effective professionals are the ones who know when to stop. In a world that runs on urgency, knowing how and when to take a break has become a radical act of self-preservation and performance.

Breaks are not just nice to have. They're science-backed, brain-boosting, creativity-enhancing necessities. Emerging research in neuroscience, psychology, and workplace behaviour all point to the same conclusion: better breaks mean better work. Yet, most of us are guilty of either skipping them altogether or defaulting to doom-scrolling on our phones, only to return to our screens feeling no more energised than before.

So, what makes a good break? And how can we rewire our routines to make breaks feel less like a guilty indulgence and more like the productivity power tools they truly are? Let's dive into the science of taking smarter pauses—and how a few well-earned minutes away from your desk can completely change the way you work.

The Science of Effective Breaks

A growing body of research is helping to debunk the myth that constant work equals consistent output. In a comprehensive systematic review by Lyubikh, Gulseren, and Premji (2022), it was found that work breaks, when used effectively, play a pivotal role in enhancing employee well-being and performance. These breaks serve as psychological breathers, allowing the brain time to reset, refocus, and replenish the cognitive energy required for deep and focused work.

The Science Behind Smarter Breaks During the Work

Harvard Business Review, in a 2025 article by researchers Kira Schabram and Christopher M. Barnes notes that planned, intentional breaks reduce burnout and actively boost creativity. Rather than treating breaks as something we take when we're already exhausted, the research suggests integrating them as proactive parts of the workday, like pit stops in a Formula 1 race. The goal isn't to pause when we're already empty, but to prevent the tank from hitting that point at all.

When to Break: The Rhythm of Productivity

While many of us fall into an ad-hoc pattern of taking breaks only when we hit the

mental roadblocks, data from productivity tracking app DeskTime suggests that the most efficient workers actually follow a consistent rhythm. Their research found that the top 10% most productive people work for an average of 52 minutes and then take a 17-minute break. This so-called "52/17 rule" works because it respects the natural ebb and flow of mental stamina—something our brains are wired to follow.

Rather than waiting until you feel overwhelmed or fatigued, scheduled breaks at regular intervals keeps your performance sharp and prevents mental clutter from building up. Think of it like sharpening your axe before chopping wood; you'll get more done with less effort.

What a Good Break Look Like

So, what happens during a "good" break? Science says it's not the act of stepping away alone that matters, it's what you do with that time. Breaks that involve physical activity, such as stretching or walking, significantly outperform sedentary breaks in terms of reducing stress and improving mood. A study led by Curtin University's Cecilie Thøgersen-Ntoumani showed that just a 30-minute lunchtime walk improved relaxation levels and reduced tension among office workers.

Mindfulness practices, such as meditation or deep breathing, have also gained traction, particularly among workers in high-pressure roles. These activities don't just help you "relax", they increase emotional regulation and lower cortisol levels, setting you up for better decision-making when you return to work.

And then there's the social side. Small, informal conversations with colleagues—even a light-hearted chat at the coffee machine can create a sense of belonging that helps buffer against workplace stress. As it turns out, humans are wired for connection, and those micro-interactions during breaks help support emotional resilience more than we often realise.

Why We Skip Breaks and How to Stop

Despite all the evidence, skipping breaks is still the norm in many workplaces. Cultural norms around overwork and constant availability play a significant role. According to Harvard Business Review, employees often feel guilty about taking breaks, especially in high-performance environments, because it might be perceived as slacking or disengagement. However, in reality, skipping breaks often leads to diminishing returns, including slower thinking, increased errors, and heightened emotional fatigue.

One solution is to shift workplace culture itself. When leaders model healthy break behaviour, such as taking

walks, having lunch away from their desks, or blocking off calendar time for a pause, it allows employees to do the same. Likewise, companies can reinforce the importance of rest by designing workspaces that include lounges, walking paths, or quiet rooms where people can truly unplug.

Breaks Are Not a Weakness, They're a Strategy

Taking better breaks is not a sign that you're slowing down, it's a sign that you're working smarter. The world's top performers, from athletes to executives, know that recovery is a non-negotiable part of sustained success. The same is true for you and me. So the next time you feel guilty about stepping away from your screen, remember this: your brain is not a machine, it's a living, breathing organ that thrives on rhythm, rest, and renewal. The best work doesn't come from constant effort, it comes from the space between efforts, too. It's time we stop seeing breaks as distractions and start seeing them as the competitive advantage they truly are. ♦





Redefining HR Leadership Through Strategy, Innovation, and Culture

MARK LEWIS

Head of People and Culture,
Connetics

Mark Lewis has redefined what it means to be a true HR leader in today's rapidly evolving business world. As the head of Human Resources at Connetics, his leadership goes beyond traditional HR roles—it's about shaping a culture that aligns people with purpose, innovation with inclusion, and strategy with success. Under his stewardship, HR has become a critical driver of organisational transformation.

Mark's vision for HR is clear: it's not just about filling vacancies or enforcing policies but creating an

environment where employees are the heartbeat of the organisation. His leadership reflects a deep understanding of the critical role HR plays in driving business results while fostering a workplace where people feel valued, engaged, and motivated to contribute their best.

Strategic Transformation: From Support to Strategic Partner

When Mark first joined Connetics, HR was seen primarily as an administrative function, not a core strategic driver. However, he immediately saw the opportunity to elevate HR into a powerhouse that would support, enhance, and drive business objectives. For Mark, this transformation was non-negotiable. HR had to prove its worth by becoming a true business partner.

One of his first moves was to integrate data analytics into HR processes. Recognising that HR decisions must be informed by data, Mark led the charge in using predictive analytics to identify high-potential talent and develop personalised retention plans. This not only improved recruitment outcomes but also ensured that Connetics retained its top performers, ultimately driving long-term business success.

By aligning HR strategy with the overall business strategy, Mark made HR a critical component of the company's success, not just a back-office function. This data-driven approach made HR decisions more transparent, measurable, and impactful, ensuring that HR became an essential voice in executive decision-making.

Fostering a Culture of Inclusion and Innovation

While aligning HR with business strategy was a foundational shift, Mark knew that culture would be a crucial element of any long-term success. His approach to culture was centred on inclusion and innovation—two pillars he saw as inextricably

linked. For Mark, a diverse and inclusive workplace isn't just a moral imperative; it's a business necessity.

Mark implemented programmes to promote diversity at all levels of the organisation, including unconscious bias training, diverse talent recruitment, and mentorship programmes for under-represented groups. The result was a company culture that didn't just tolerate diversity but celebrated it. Employees from diverse backgrounds brought different perspectives, leading to more creative solutions and better business outcomes.

One of the key initiatives Mark introduced was the Innovation Challenge, an annual competition where teams across the company submit ideas to improve business operations. This challenge became a cornerstone of Connetics' culture, showcasing how an inclusive, diverse workplace drives innovation and engagement, ultimately benefiting the company.

Mark recognised that leadership wasn't just about technical skills—it was about developing emotional intelligence (EQ), resilience, and adaptability in future leaders

Building the Leaders of Tomorrow

Mark's third strategic pillar focused on leadership development. In an ever-changing business environment, ensuring a pipeline of capable and adaptable leaders is critical. Mark recognised that leadership wasn't just about technical skills—it was about developing emotional intelligence (EQ), resilience, and adaptability in future leaders.

To support this vision, Mark launched a leadership development programme that emphasised EQ. By incorporating emotional intelligence into the curriculum, Mark ensured that future leaders would possess the ability to understand and manage their emotions and the emotions of others. This approach created more empathetic and well-rounded leaders, equipped to navigate complex business challenges.

The leadership academy became a hallmark of Mark's commitment to talent development, providing personalised coaching, mentorship, and cross-departmental collaboration. These efforts have resulted in stronger leadership, increased employee retention, and a culture of continuous development.

Leveraging Technology to Drive HR Success

Mark also understood that as businesses become more digital, HR must evolve. His leadership embraced technology to streamline HR processes and enhance employee engagement. Under his guidance, Connetics adopted cutting-edge HR technologies that transformed talent acquisition, performance management, and employee engagement.

By using AI and machine learning in the recruitment process, Connetics could identify the best-fit candidates more efficiently, eliminating bias and accelerating hiring decisions. Additionally, performance management tools allowed managers to provide continuous feedback and track employee progress, ensuring alignment with organisational goals.

Mark's focus on technology extended to employee engagement. He introduced platforms that gave employees a voice in real-time, allowing them to track their career development and engage directly with leadership. These tools empowered employees, increased engagement, and made HR processes more transparent and accessible.

Mark has transformed HR at Connetics into a dynamic, forward-thinking function that plays an integral role in the company's overall success. Through his strategic vision, commitment to innovation and inclusion, and dedication to developing future leaders, Mark has redefined what it means to be an HR leader. His approach shows that HR can no longer be seen as just a support function but as a key driver of business transformation. ♦

FIRSTWORK

How a 2024 Startup Is Reshaping Frontline Workforce Management?

When Vardhan Kapoor and Shubham Choudhary launched FirstWork in 2024, they weren't chasing a trendy app or building another productivity tool for executives. They were solving a problem hiding in plain sight, the broken infrastructure behind managing frontline and seasonal workers.

While most tech startups have catered to desk workers with ergonomic Zoom integrations and AI-powered calendars, the 2.7 billion frontline workers, nearly 80% of the global workforce, have long been stuck with outdated, manual, and inefficient systems for hiring, onboarding, compliance, and training.

"We saw a major disconnect," said Vardhan Kapoor, now CEO. "There's endless investment in optimising white-collar workflows, but the people who power the world — nurses, warehouse workers, drivers, retail staff were often onboarded with clipboards and outdated spreadsheets."

This pain point was the genesis of FirstWork, a platform designed to automate the chaotic, repetitive, and time-consuming aspects of managing a fluid workforce — and to do it with AI at its core.

Reinventing Workforce Management from the Ground Up

From the moment a worker is hired, FirstWork's platform kicks into gear — automated onboarding pathways, AI-generated compliance workflows, and customisable training modules tailored to both industry regulations and company-specific processes. It's the kind of frictionless experience once reserved for Silicon Valley coders — now brought to nurses in Mumbai, drivers in Dallas, and teachers in Nairobi.

HIRING

Built-In Scheduling & Calendaring

TRAINING

Custom, AI-Generated Onboarding

PAYROLL

Rapid, Same/Next-Day Payments

ANALYZING

End-to-End Data Insights

REVOLUTIONIZING WORKFORCE MANAGEMENT

But FirstWork is not just about efficiency. The founders understood that for frontline workers, many of whom cycle through seasonal gigs or short-term contracts, clarity and ease are just as important as compliance.

"We're not just digitising paperwork," said Shubham Choudhary. "We're building trust, reducing stress, and giving workers a better first day — and employers a more confident one."

Their tech stack is impressively light-touch: AI that learns from past HR workflows, plugs into existing systems (like Workday or BambooHR), and automates repetitive decision-making. For HR teams juggling thousands



of seasonal recruits, this means cutting onboarding time by up to 60%, according to FirstWork's internal beta trials.

FirstWork's \$5M Vote of Confidence

FirstWork's vision resonated strongly with top-tier investors. In early 2024, the company raised \$5 million in seed

- HIRE 80% FASTER**
AI-driven automations streamline candidate experience and your recruiting pipeline.
- SEAMLESS SCHEDULING**
Integrated calendars end the email ping-pong. Candidates self-schedule, reducing manual admin.
- PERPETUAL COMPLIANCE ENGINE**
Real-time verification ensures every new hire meets requirements without added steps.

funding, with the round led by Gradient Ventures — Google's AI-focused venture fund and backed by industry stalwarts like Y Combinator, Soma Capital, and 468 Capital.

The funders weren't just investing in tech; they were betting on experience. Kapoor had spent years scaling workforce operations at Deliveroo and Remitly, while Choudhary brought deep technical and product expertise. Together, they understood both the people and systems that make frontline industries tick.

"FirstWork is attacking a \$200B+ global opportunity with clarity and urgency," said a spokesperson from Gradient. "What Slack did for white-collar collaboration, FirstWork is doing for the backbone of the global workforce."

FirstWork's Secret Sauce

Where FirstWork truly stands out is its commitment to



humanizing automation. The founders understood that many frontline workers are skeptical of digital platforms — often for good reason. Too many apps are built by people who've never done a shift on their feet.

So FirstWork flipped the model. Their onboarding flow is mobile-first, multilingual, and visual. Their compliance prompts use plain language, not legal jargon. And their AI suggestions can be overridden by managers, ensuring that technology assists, but never overrides, human judgment.

"We're not replacing people," Vardhan Kapoor explains. "We're giving people tools to do better work, faster and to feel seen and supported while doing it."

This blend of compassion and code is fast becoming

a competitive advantage, especially as labor markets become more volatile and companies need flexible, scalable solutions.

The Last Mile of Digital Transformation

In many ways, FirstWork represents the last mile of digital transformation. While enterprises have digitised sales, logistics, and finance, the actual people doing the hands-on work have often been left behind. By building a platform that respects their time, intelligence, and dignity, FirstWork isn't just automating HR, it's elevating an entire class of workers. And in doing so, it's not just building a company, it's laying the foundation for a more inclusive, responsive, and intelligent future of work. ♦



Driving Business Success Through People and Strategy

NANTHINI SATHASIVAM

Director, Global HR Business Partnering & Projects, Plaza Premium Group

Strategy alone can't spark success. It's the people who ignite that fire! This realisation was a game changer for Nanthini Sathasivam leading her to transition from finance to human resources she discovered her true calling after completing an MBA in HR. Nanthini's newfound passion enabled her to craft high-performing teams and connect people strategy with business growth.

Nanthini's HR initiatives are both budget-friendly and aligned with the financial and operational goals of organisations. She optimises costs through effective workforce planning and compliance strategies, which boosts operational efficiencies and productivity. With a keen focus on employer branding and keeping abreast of HR market trends, Nanthini continues to prove that organisations thrive when strategy and people work in harmony.

With over 29 years of experience in the hospitality sector, Nanthini has excelled in various HR roles, leaving a lasting impact. Her combination of extensive HR expertise and a background in finance and audit distinguishes her in the field. Nanthini has garnered numerous accolades, including four awards in one year for a luxury hotel and recognition as

one of Qatar's 'Most Influential HR Leaders' by the World HRD Congress. She has also achieved two Senior Fellow recognitions in Certified International Professional in Talent Development and Transformational Leadership by Cambridge Global Learning, UK, demonstrating her commitment to HR growth and innovation.

TradeFlock recently discussed with Nanthini her work and strategies.

What universal HR principles apply across industries and regions?

Business landscapes may differ, but the essence of great HR remains universal. Great HR is universally rooted in diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging, which drive transformation and strengthen company culture amid evolving consumer demographics and societal values to maintain a competitive edge.

Another principle is that open, transparent communication fosters trust and collaboration, enhancing employee engagement and collective success.

Essential HR practices also include continuous development, fair compensation, and work-life balance. Investing in training and career advancement boosts skills and supports growth, while competitive compensation reflects employee value, and flexible work options enhance well-being.

Finally, data-driven HR strategies are crucial for optimising talent management, improving workforce efficiency, and ensuring organisational resilience in a dynamic marketplace.

What essential skills define today's HR professionals, and how have they evolved?

In today's dynamic business landscape, HR professionals have shifted from transactional tasks to transformational responsibilities that drive sustainable growth and enhance organisational attractiveness. Key skills sought include strong leadership and decision-making, with HR acting as strategic partners to influence change.

This requires expertise in talent management, organisational development, and strategic planning. Additionally, data-driven decision-making is revolutionising HR by predicting talent trends and improving workforce projections, fostering continuous learning and development that supports employee growth and drives organisational success.

What's the biggest lapse organisations have in unlocking human capital value?

Unlocking human capital value begins with clear vision and specific goals; frequent changes can weaken alignment, leading to disengagement and inefficiencies. Underestimating diversity and inclusion restricts inspiration and potential, as they fail to appreciate different perspectives.



QUICK FACTS

Country: **Malaysia**

Your go-to stress buster: **Cooking and hosting people**

A book that changed your perspective: **Ikigai**

Your dream vacation destination: **Japan**

If not HR, your alternate career choice: **A Musician**

Neglecting employee feedback can hamper morale and commitment, while providing growth opportunities is imperative. Focusing on long-term talent development through training and wellness enhances skills and drives satisfaction, improving performance. Resistance to new ideas and lack of work-life balance can cause burnout and reduced productivity. In a competitive job market, offering flexible work options and recognising contributions is vital for attracting and retaining talent.

How do you meet the evolving expectations of Gen Z and Millennials in the workplace?

As we enter 2025, Millennials lead the workforce, closely followed by Gen Z. Their expectations differ from past generations, compelling organisations to adapt. Both generations thrive on policies that promote flexibility and well-being and seek employers aligned with their values, particularly in corporate social responsibility, sustainability and ethical practices. Integrating these principles into business strategies can attract and keep talent. They also demand mentorship, skill development and clear paths for advancement to foster belonging.

Growing up in a digital age, they expect employers to leverage technology effectively by providing tools that enhance productivity. Additionally, economic uncertainties drive their desire for job security, stable employment, and competitive compensation, which are essential for building a resilient workforce.

Which HR trend is overhyped, and which needs more focus?

Hybrid working is often seen as the future of work, promising flexibility and improved work-life balance, but its implementation can be challenging. Many organisations struggle to maintain company culture and ensure equitable participation between remote and in-office employees. Not all roles fit hybrid models, and disparities in home office setups can exacerbate employee inequalities. The assumption that hybrid work automatically enhances satisfaction overlooks individual preferences and management needs.

Conversely, AI in HR is revolutionising the field by streamlining processes and enhancing decision-making. Organisations should communicate transparently about AI integration and position AI as an enabler whilst upskilling for a more agile, data-driven HR function. ♦



BURN THE RÉSUMÉS

The Skill-First Model That's Beating the Talent Crunch

In the talent economy of 2025, resumes stuffed with Ivy League degrees are no longer your golden ticket to the C-suite—or even to a first-round interview. A quiet revolution is reshaping how companies spot potential: think GitHub portfolios over GPAs, bootcamp badges over business school diplomas. Across boardrooms and Zoom rooms alike, a powerful idea is taking root that what you can do matters more than where you learned to do it. Beyond a trend; it's a full-scale rewiring of how opportunity is distributed, and HR is the architect. In a world obsessed with disruption, skills-first

hiring is arguably the most disruptive (and human) shift of all. Welcome to the era where capability trumps pedigree and the gatekeepers are handing over the keys.

At the centre of this transformation? Human Resources. HR leaders are dismantling age-old hiring hierarchies and building pathways where talent, not titles, speaks loudest.

The Fall of the Pedigree Pedestal

For decades, academic pedigree was the holy grail of hiring, Harvard over hustle, MBAs over makers. But that thinking is now no longer in fashion.

According to a 2024 report from Harvard Business School and the Burning Glass Institute, job postings requiring degrees have dropped by nearly 46% in the U.S. since 2017, particularly in middle-skill roles. The data shows that companies who remove degree requirements experience faster hiring cycles, greater retention, and improved workforce diversity.

As PwC's 2024 Global Workforce Hopes and Fears Survey reveals, 75% of workers feel confident they can acquire the skills they need without going back to school. That's a profound mindset shift—and it has enormous implications for talent acquisition.

HR: The Architects of Skills-First Future

Its HR teams who are turning this philosophy into reality. They're rewriting job descriptions, retraining recruiters, and reengineering performance management systems to prioritise what candidates can do, not just what they've studied.

Take IBM. The tech behemoth famously removed bachelor's degree requirements for more than 50% of its job listings, focusing instead on "new collar" talent—individuals trained through bootcamps, online platforms, or community colleges. The result? A more agile, diverse, and skilled workforce, according to Nickle LaMoreaux, IBM's Chief HR Officer.

Similarly, Google's Career Certificates Program, now in partnership with over 150 employers globally, enables candidates to upskill in fields such as data analytics and UX design—no degree required. Internal data shows certificate graduates are twice as likely to be hired compared to degree-holders alone.

Market Success: Why Does It Work?

This approach is equitable and effective. According to a 2024 McKinsey Global Institute study, companies that embrace skills-first models are 63% more likely to outperform peers in innovation and 44% more likely to have higher employee engagement scores.

Cisco Systems, through its OneTen initiatives, is focused on hiring 1 million Black Americans without a four-year degree into family sustaining

careers. Not only does this drive inclusivity, but it also plugs vital skills gaps.

And in India, Wipro and Infosys have partnered with digital learning platforms to recruit based on practical assessments rather than academic transcripts. The outcome? Reduced attrition, better performance and improved employer branding.

Skill Signals Are the New Degrees

To make this model scalable, HR is leveraging technology to validate skills in real-time. AI-powered tools now simulate on-the-job tasks in candidate assessments—whether it's writing SQL queries, troubleshooting customer scenarios, or managing a virtual team.

Platforms like HackerRank, Codility, and Vervoe are becoming as crucial as résumés. LinkedIn's Skills Assessments and GitHub contributions are more telling than a GPA, especially in the digital economy.

Meanwhile, certifications from platforms like Coursera, edX, and Udacity are becoming mainstream indicators of readiness. A Bain & Company 2024 Talent Study noted that 58% of hiring managers believe micro-credentials now carry "equal or greater weight" than a bachelor's degree.

Challenges? Of Course. But the Risk of Not Adapting is Greater.

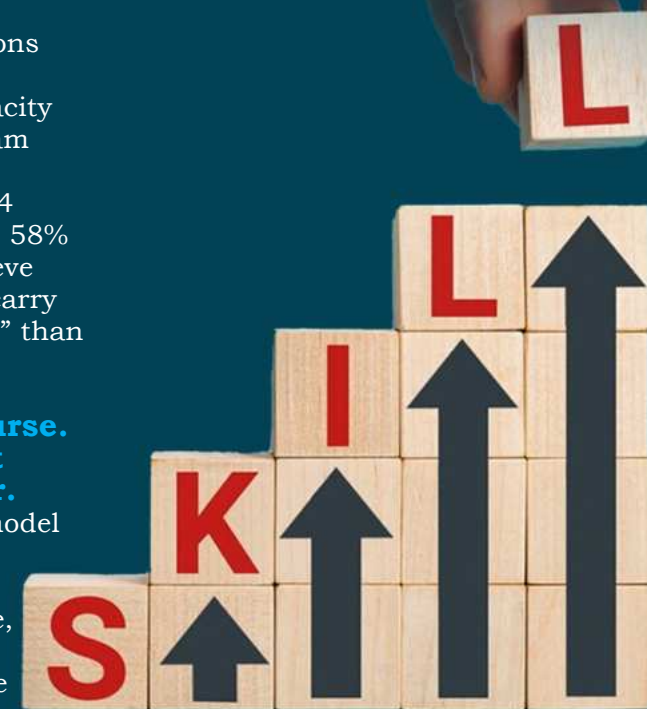
Adopting a skills-first model isn't without hurdles. Companies need robust upskilling infrastructure, bias-aware tools, and leadership buy-in. Some

hiring managers still cling to outdated assumptions about pedigree. And measurement? It's still evolving.

But the alternative—clinging to credentialism—is riskier. It narrows your talent pipeline, reinforces inequality, and overlooks high-potential people who are more than capable of driving results.

The Future Doesn't Wear a Cap and Gown

The era of "degree = destiny" is fading. In its place, we are witnessing the rise of dynamic, democratised, and deeply human hiring. The skill-first movement isn't a trend; it's the talent revolution HR was born to lead. As the business world gets flatter, faster, and more digital, the companies that will win won't be the ones with the fanciest diplomas. They'll be the ones who can spot brilliance in unexpected places, empower it, and scale it. At the heart of that future lies HR. ♦





From Navigating Global Challenges to Shaping a People-Centric Future

PAULO PISANO

Chief Human Resources Officer, Booking Holdings



From guiding organisations through complex transitions to leading people strategies during crises, Paulo Pisano's career exemplifies what it means to be a modern HR leader. As the Chief Human Resources Officer at Booking Holdings, he has brought a unique blend of resilience, vision, and empathy to one of the world's leading digital travel platforms.

With over 25 years of experience across industries like financial services, education, technology, and media, Paulo has consistently championed a people-centric approach. His career includes leadership roles at Citigroup, Barclays, Pearson, and Galp, where he built a deep understanding of organisational effectiveness, talent management, and cultural transformation across global markets.

Leading Through Crisis

Paulo joined Booking.com in early 2020, just as the world was entering the COVID-19 pandemic. For an international travel company, the pandemic presented unprecedented challenges. Almost overnight, Booking.com had to reimagine how it worked, how it supported its people, and how it prepared for an uncertain future.

Paulo's leadership during this period was pivotal. Instead of focusing only on immediate operational survival, he

pushed for strategies that prioritised employee well-being, resilience, and engagement. His ability to blend empathy with business acumen helped Booking.com maintain its culture and prepare for a hybrid future of work.

Shaping a People-Centric Culture

One of Paulo's early focuses was managing the company's transition to hybrid and remote work. He understood that maintaining engagement across dispersed teams required more than technology — it required intentional efforts to foster connection, well-being, and trust.

Paulo championed initiatives around mental health support, flexible working policies, and programs that reinforced belonging and collaboration. His approach emphasised that productivity and employee happiness were not mutually exclusive but deeply interconnected.

Through clear communication, practical support, and leadership development initiatives, Paulo helped Booking.com evolve its culture without losing its core values. His efforts ensured that employees felt supported, heard, and empowered, even during uncertain times.

Building for the Long Term

Beyond immediate crisis management, Paulo has been instrumental in building systems for long-term organisational resilience. His people strategy at Booking.com focuses on four pillars: talent development, diversity and inclusion, employee engagement, and data-driven HR practices.

A strong advocate for developing internal leadership, Paulo prioritised nurturing talent from within. He believes in giving people growth opportunities early, equipping them to lead and innovate at every level. By investing in leadership development, he helped create a strong pipeline of future-ready leaders across the organisation.

His commitment to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) also stands out. Paulo embedded DEI principles into Booking.com's operations, setting measurable goals and holding leadership accountable. Under his guidance, the company has expanded representation across leadership roles and fostered an inclusive environment where diverse perspectives drive better business outcomes.

Moreover, Paulo's emphasis on data and analytics in HR has modernised decision-

making processes. From workforce planning to employee engagement tracking, data insights have allowed the HR function to be more agile and proactive, aligning more closely with business goals.

Recognition and Impact

Under Paulo's leadership, Booking.com's commitment to its people has not gone unnoticed. The company has earned significant recognition, including Best Leadership Teams 2023, Best Global Culture 2023, and listings on Forbes' World's Best Employers and Fortune's World's Most Admired Companies.

These accolades reflect the success of the strategies Paulo put in place — strategies that combined humanity with business intelligence.

Beyond Booking.com

Paulo's impact extends beyond his role at Booking.com. He is a certified executive coach and actively mentors emerging leaders. His board memberships at organisations like Singularity University, Teach For All, and Stir Education demonstrate his passion for education, innovation, and leadership development on a global scale.

He believes deeply in the transformative power of leadership and education to create more equitable and thriving societies. Through his advisory roles, he helps shape programmes that unlock human potential far beyond the corporate world.

A Leader for the New Era

From the beginning of his career to his current role at Booking.com, Paulo Pisano has shown that effective HR leadership is about more than managing processes — it's about inspiring people, building trust, and preparing organisations for the future.

His journey offers a powerful lesson: in times of disruption, organisations don't just need strategy — they need empathy, vision, and resilience. Paulo's ability to combine these qualities has made him not only a respected HR leader but also a key architect of Booking.com's evolution into a more agile, inclusive, and people-centred company.

As workforces around the world continue to change, Paulo's example shows what it truly means to lead with both heart and strategy — and why that combination will define the most successful organisations of the future. ♦

1 MAY
1926**Ford Became the
First Company to
Implement a
40-Hour Workweek**

Recently, there has been considerable debate about achieving a work-life balance. Some people consider it extremely important, while others believe it's not nearly as important. No matter what anyone thinks. Recently, the founder of Infosys, N. R. Narayana Murthy, shared his thoughts on this debate, suggesting that companies should consider implementing 70-hour workweeks, which met with considerable backlash. Some said that this undermines an individual's rights and creates a mental volcano that can erupt at any given moment. At the same time, some suggest that short workweeks are a thing of the future and not yet viable.

However, today marks the 99th anniversary of an event that shows there are some companies ahead of their time. Ford, one of the world's biggest automakers, was so ahead of its time that it gave its employees a 40-hour workweek in 1926. This was unprecedented for the time. Some said Ford has gone mad, while others appreciated the initiative.

The Background of the Decision

Before 1926, industrial workers, including those at Ford Motor Company, typically endured gruelling schedules of six days a week, often totalling 60 hours or more. Factory conditions were demanding, with repetitive tasks and the "speed-up" system—a Ford innovation to maximise assembly line efficiency—pushing workers to sustain intense productivity levels. This led to widespread fatigue, high employee turnover, and strained personal lives, as workers had little time for rest, family, or leisure.

The decision to reduce the workweek from six to five days was first considered in 1922, when Ford announced plans to adopt a five-day schedule. Edsel Ford, Henry's son and the company's president, emphasised the importance of leisure, stating, "Every man needs more than one day a week for rest and recreation... The Ford Company always has sought to promote [an] ideal home life for its employees." However, it wasn't until 1926 that the policy was fully

implemented, reflecting a strategic response to multiple pressures, including labour unrest, market competition, and evolving societal expectations.

The initiative is primarily attributed to Henry Ford, the visionary industrialist and founder of Ford Motor Company. Ford's philosophy blended pragmatic business goals with a belief in improving workers' lives to enhance productivity and consumption. He famously stated in a 1926 interview with *World's Work* magazine: "Leisure is an indispensable ingredient in a growing consumer market because working people need to have enough free time to find uses for consumer products, including automobiles." Ford argued that a shorter workweek would give workers time to spend their wages, particularly on Ford vehicles, thereby stimulating the economy.

Impact of the Initiative

Initiatives like these often have long-standing and acute impacts on the behaviour

and psyche of the employees. Ford's employees were starting to feel that their company genuinely cares about the so-called "work-life balance." In 1914, Ford significantly increased the daily wages of its workers, which had already instilled a sense of loyalty among the employees. This 1926 decision further solidified the loyalty. However, some employees feared that the reduced working hours would result in reduced pay. Contrary to popular belief, Ford did not let that happen, adjusting the pay structure in a way that ensured this decision did not impact workers in terms of daily wages. According to Ford's own findings and studies, the years following 1926 saw a significant increase in productivity and profitability, which Ford attributes to this very decision.

The Global Impact

When Ford Motor Company cut its workweek to five days and 40 hours on May 1, 1926, the world noticed, and the ripple effects were revolutionary. Manufacturers worldwide, from Europe to Asia and Latin America, watched Ford's bold experiment with keen interest. By the 1930s, the five-day workweek gained momentum globally, with countries like the United Kingdom and Germany joining in, driven by rising labor demands and shifting economics. Ford's move sparked a global rethinking of work-life balance. Its symbolic timing—announced on International Workers' Day, May 1—enhanced its significance with labor movements worldwide, making Ford's policy a rallying cry for fairer hours and better lives.

Ford's initiative initiated a major shift in U.S. labor law, leading to the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) of 1938, signed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. The FLSA began with a 44-hour workweek but established Ford's 40-hour model as the national standard by 1940, transforming American work culture. Labor unions, advocating for an eight-hour day since the 1860s, claimed victory, asserting they pressured companies like Ford to act. Experts such as David Bensman from Rutgers University note that Ford's action was a strategic response to rising union pressure. Globally, socialist movements, including the Soviet Union—which implemented an eight-hour day in 1917—used Ford's example to demand labor reforms, demonstrating that Ford's policy sparked a global labor revolution. ♦





An Unapologetic Answerer To Naysayers

ROCHELLE M. THOMPSON

CEO,
RMThompson & Co.

"I remember working hard for a seat at the table, and then I realized it was time to roll up my sleeves and build my own chairs."

This statement isn't just a reflection—it's a bold declaration of determination, resilience, and visionary leadership, which define Rochelle Thompson. It serves as a powerful reminder that sometimes, waiting for opportunities isn't enough—we must create them ourselves. Rochelle Thompson, CEO of RMThompson & Co., embodies this spirit. Through grit, clarity of purpose, and unyielding resolve, she has turned challenges into stepping stones, paving the way for success and innovation.

Rochelle's professional journey is nothing short of extraordinary. From shaping innovative HR strategies in fast-paced industries to practicing clinical psychology and championing equality, diversity, and inclusion, her career is a testament to her ability to tackle complex challenges with grace and resolve. At RMThompson & Co., she has built a transformative organisation that puts mental health, inclusivity, and innovation at its core, proving that bold leadership can drive meaningful change.

Beyond her corporate achievements, Rochelle's passion for social justice shines brightly through The Black Voice Project, an initiative she describes as "bringing light to those made invisible." This groundbreaking platform

amplifies marginalised voices, challenges systemic inequities, and fosters spaces where everyone feels valued and empowered. Through this work, Rochelle continues to redefine what it means to lead with purpose and compassion.

Rochelle isn't just leading—she's redefining what it means to create opportunities for others. Her story reminds us that change doesn't come from waiting—it comes from stepping up, taking action, and building something better.

Recently, TradeFlock had the opportunity to sit down with Rochelle for an interview. She shared her thoughts on leadership, her vision for inclusion, and the steps she's taking to ensure everyone has a seat at the table.

Q How have your experiences in HR leadership, clinical psychology, and EDI consulting influenced your leadership style?

My leadership journey is deeply personal because it's rooted in understanding people—what drives them, what challenges them, and what helps them grow. In HR, I discovered the magic of creating cultures where people can shine as their authentic selves, knowing that thriving individuals make thriving businesses. Clinical psychology taught me to truly listen—not just to words but to fears, hopes, and barriers—helping me lead with empathy and guide others through transformative moments. As an EDI consultant, I've made it my mission to champion inclusion by valuing every voice and focusing on culture adds, not culture fits. For me, leadership is about authenticity and building spaces where people, and ultimately organizations, can flourish together.

Q What fuels your passion for equity and inclusion, and what systemic changes are most urgent today?

I've always believed that inclusion isn't just a value—it's a necessity. My passion for EDI comes from seeing how inequities hold back incredible talent, not because of ability, but because 'systems thrive when equity isn't an afterthought, but a design principle.' I'm driven to create spaces where people feel valued and empowered to succeed.

Today's most urgent need is moving from talk to measurable action—fair hiring practices, transparent pay, diverse leadership, and

psychological safety where authenticity is welcomed. For me, EDI is about building systems that uplift everyone and drive real progress.

Q What inspired The Black Voice Project, and what impact has it had on BIPOC communities?

The Black Voice Project was born from a simple idea: darkness isn't a void—it's where transformation begins. Too often, unseen struggles and unheard voices are pushed aside, but I wanted to change that. This project amplifies those voices, bringing light to stories that deserve to be told.

With over 10,000 lives touched, we've witnessed people reclaim their power, their identities, and their hope. It's about turning invisibility into visibility and reminding everyone that even in the darkest spaces, there's immense potential for healing and change.

Q Can you share an example from The Black Voice Project that reflects your belief in the power of "one single action"?

At The Black Voice Project, we believe that **'one act of belief can spark a lifetime of change.'** I'll never forget a young woman returning home after incarceration, uncertain and unseen. We started with a resume and interview prep—one small action. That step led her to secure a job, regain her confidence, and lay the foundation for her business. By combining practical support with mental health counselling, we helped her reclaim her purpose. Her journey proves that one moment of support can transform a life and inspire lasting change.

Q How do you define success, and how has that definition changed over time?

Success, for me, isn't about titles or accolades—it's about the journey and the growth along the way. Early on, I thought success was measured by milestones and recognition. Over time, I've learned that **'true success is how you show up for yourself and others, leaving a path for others to thrive.'**

Professionally and personally, it's about purpose and impact. When I help someone believe in themselves or take a step toward their dream, that's a success. It's not about perfection but progress and finding joy in creating a legacy that makes the journey easier for others.

Q How do you see your roles in HR leadership and community advocacy shaping the future?

I believe that 'real change starts with owning our impact.' As a changemaker in HR and community advocacy, my role is to create spaces where people feel seen, valued, and safe to grow. I lead with accountability—admitting when I'm wrong and using those moments to build trust and inspire others to do the same. Whether it's fostering inclusive workplaces or amplifying community voices, my goal is to spark progress that connects people, breaks barriers, and builds a future where everyone can thrive. ♦



MERGERS, MARKETS & MEANING

HR's Strategic Seat at the Table is No Longer Optional

We are living in 2025 and the role of human resources (HR) has transcended traditional boundaries. No longer confined to administrative functions, HR leaders are now pivotal in shaping mergers and acquisitions (M&A), spearheading market expansion, and crafting brand identity. This transformation underscores the necessity of having HR at the CEO table, where strategic decisions are made.

HR's Strategic Role in Mergers & Acquisitions

M&A activities are complex endeavours that go far beyond balance sheets and legal agreements. In today's rapidly evolving business environment—where workforce expectations, digital transformation, and global operations converge—the human element is more critical than ever. HR leaders are uniquely positioned to steer cultural alignment, talent strategies, and organizational redesign during these pivotal transitions.

According to a recent EY study, organizations that actively involve HR from the

earliest stages of an M&A process report smoother transitions, stronger employee engagement, and significantly better post-merger performance. The study highlights cultural integration, talent retention, and transparent communication as mission-critical areas—domains where HR plays a leading role.

A compelling example from the 2020s is the \$63 billion merger between Bristol Myers Squibb and Celgene in 2019, finalized in early 2020. As two biopharmaceutical powerhouses came together, HR was embedded in every phase of the integration process.

SPOTLIGHT

Here's how HR operationalised the merger:

- **Culture Diagnostics and Alignment:** HR led an in-depth culture audit of both organizations, identifying key values, decision-making styles, and employee expectations. This informed a unifying cultural blueprint that balanced innovation, speed, and scientific integrity.
- **Talent Mapping and Retention Strategy:** Critical talent in R&D, regulatory, and commercial functions were identified early. Customised retention packages and growth paths were designed to ensure continuity and prevent attrition during the uncertain transition period.
- **Integrated Communication Plan:** HR, in collaboration with internal comms, rolled out a comprehensive, multi-channel communications strategy. This included CEO-

led town halls, pulse surveys, feedback forums, and real-time Q&A platforms to keep 30,000+ employees informed and engaged.

■ **Digital HR System Harmonization:** Legacy HRIS systems from both companies were integrated into a unified digital platform, enabling seamless onboarding, payroll, benefits, and performance tracking across the combined entity.

■ **Change Leadership & Manager Enablement:** HR facilitated workshops to equip leaders with tools to manage change, address employee concerns, and reinforce the new shared purpose of the organization.

The result? The merger not only met its synergy targets ahead of schedule but also maintained high employee engagement scores and successfully launched new treatments during the integration phase—a testament to the strategic value of HR in navigating high-stakes transitions.

Driving Market Expansion Through Talent Strategy

Expanding into new markets in the 2020s is not just a business move—it's a people strategy. Beyond capital investment and logistics, success hinges on understanding cultural nuances, labor laws, and local talent ecosystems. Here, HR is not a support function—it's a strategic driver.

A recent PwC report underscores this, stating that companies involving HR early in their market expansion planning are significantly more successful in securing

local talent, driving engagement, and accelerating operational readiness.

Consider a hypothetical example: Nexora, a fast-growing U.S.-based AI and cloud solutions provider, set its sights on expanding into Southeast Asia—specifically Indonesia and Vietnam—to tap into the region's booming digital economy and skilled tech workforce.

Rather than treating HR as an afterthought, Nexora embedded its People & Culture team at the center of its expansion roadmap.

Shaping Brand Identity and Corporate Culture

In the 2020s, where consumers increasingly align their buying decisions with brand values, corporate culture has become inseparable from brand identity. HR leaders are at the forefront of shaping this culture—not just internally for employees, but externally for the brand's public image.

Harvard Business Review research affirms that companies with strong alignment between internal culture and brand identity see marked improvements in both employee engagement and customer loyalty. When a company's people embody its values, that authenticity resonates in every customer interaction.

Take the case of Target Corporation, a U.S.-based retail powerhouse that launched a brand revitalisation campaign aimed at Millennial and Gen Z consumers. Rather than relying solely on marketing, Target's HR team played a central role in embedding

brand values, especially innovation, inclusivity, and community impact, across the employee experience

The Business Case for HR at the CEO Table

The integration of HR into strategic decision-making processes is not just beneficial—it's imperative. HR leaders bring a unique perspective that combines an understanding of human capital with strategic business acumen.

A study by McKinsey & Company found that companies where HR is involved in strategic planning report higher financial performance and employee satisfaction. Moreover, the evolving business environment, characterised by rapid technological advancements and shifting workforce dynamics, necessitates a strategic HR function. HR leaders are at the forefront of managing change, driving innovation, and ensuring organisational agility.

A Strategic Imperative for Businesses

The evidence is clear: HR's role has evolved from administrative support to strategic partnership. By involving HR leaders in high-level decision-making, organisations can better navigate the complexities of M&A, effectively expand into new markets, and cultivate a strong brand identity.

Incorporating HR at the CEO table is not merely a progressive move—it's a strategic imperative for companies aiming to thrive in the modern business landscape. ♦

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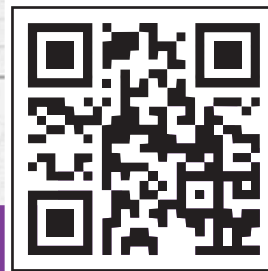
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Story of the Month

TARIFF

TARIFFS AND TENSIONS

How the U.S. Trade Policy Is Reshaping the Global Economy

In a world already shaken by inflation, war, and technological disruption, the resurgence of tariffs as a central instrument of economic policy has intensified the pressure on an already volatile global economy.

When the United States announced sweeping tariffs in early 2025, slapping a 10% blanket duty on all imports and escalating tariffs on goods from 60 countries with significant trade imbalances, economists around the globe immediately took notice. But the most important question remains: what does this mean for global trade, economic stability, and everyday consumers?

The Return of Tariff Economics

Tariffs, essentially taxes on imports, are not a new phenomenon. Historically, they've been used to protect domestic industries from foreign competition or to respond to unfair trade practices. However, in recent decades, globalisation and free trade agreements have led most economies to adopt fewer barriers.

Then came the Trump-era tariffs, Brexit negotiations, and COVID-related protectionism. These events laid the groundwork for what J.P. Morgan calls, in its April 2025 analysis, a "tariff revival era," now fully realised under the new U.S. trade doctrine.

The 2025 Tariffs: A Global Jolt

According to a McKinsey & Company analysis, the average U.S. import tariff has now surged past 20%, up from just under 2% in 2024—the highest rate in nearly 90 years. This puts enormous pressure not just on foreign exporters but also on American companies and consumers who rely on global supply chains.

The new tariffs cover more than 44% of all U.S. imports, valued at over \$1.4 trillion, according to Boston Consulting Group (BCG). Key categories include electronics, textiles, automobiles, and food products.

The immediate impact has been twofold:

Rising Costs – For both U.S. manufacturers and consumers, as imported inputs and goods become more expensive.

Global Retaliation – China, for instance, has responded with 84% tariffs on U.S. agricultural and industrial exports, as noted in J.P. Morgan's geopolitical risk memo.

Supply Chain Shake-Up

One of the most significant consequences is the restructuring of global supply chains. A Harvard Business Review article from April 2025 reports that companies are accelerating their efforts to localise production or "friend-shore" — relocating operations to politically aligned nations to reduce risk.

This transformation, however, comes at a cost. McKinsey estimates that relocating supply chains could take five to ten years and cost upwards of \$1.6 trillion globally. In the meantime, shortages and disruptions are already being felt, particularly in sectors such as semiconductors, medical devices, and green energy technologies.

Opportunity or Setback?

The Global South could be both a winner and a casualty of the tariff escalation. BCG projects that trade between China and emerging economies may increase by \$1.25 trillion by 2030, as China pivots away from

Western markets. Meanwhile, trade among emerging markets themselves is expected to increase by \$673 billion over the same period.

This redistribution of trade networks presents an opportunity for countries like Vietnam, Mexico, and India, which are rapidly becoming alternative manufacturing hubs.

However, as The Hindu BusinessLine reports, many developing nations still face infrastructure bottlenecks and political risks, meaning they may struggle to fully capitalise on shifting global supply chains.

Economic Growth Under Pressure

What does this all mean for economic growth? According to a J.P. Morgan model, the tariffs are effectively a 2.4% tax on U.S. GDP. That's equivalent to the largest peacetime tax increase since the 1940s. Inflationary pressure is mounting, and central banks now face the difficult task of balancing monetary tightening with already fragile demand.

Globally, the World Bank projects that if tit-for-tat tariffs expand, global GDP growth could decline by 1.8 percentage points annually. This could spell trouble for economies already burdened by debt and struggling with a slow post-pandemic recovery.

Business Strategy in the Age of Tariffs

For business leaders, the new normal demands agility. McKinsey recommends establishing a "geopolitical risk nerve centre" within large corporations to monitor real-time developments and respond rapidly with strategic shifts.

Similarly, J.P. Morgan Asset Management advises investors to build portfolios that can hedge against deglobalisation, such as infrastructure, domestic industrials, and commodities.

On the HR and operations side, firms are advised to consider dual sourcing, investing in digital twins to simulate disruptions, and building "shock absorbers" into every stage of the value chain.

The New Trade Order

The reintroduction of aggressive tariffs by the United States marks a significant shift in global economics. Whether viewed as a protectionist wall or a negotiating tool, the effects are real and unfolding rapidly.

From boardrooms in Berlin to manufacturing floors in Mumbai, leaders must now reckon with a future that looks very different from the pre-2020 era of borderless trade. In this evolving global economy, resilience, localisation, and agility will define the winners.

As the dust settles on this new tariff landscape, one thing is clear: the global trade order is being rewritten—not with handshakes, but with duties. ♦

Udayapriya IMBULPITIYALAGE

Group Head of Human Resources & Administration

Global Rubber Industries (Pvt) Ltd & Global Group of Companies

Udayapriya IMBULPITIYALAGE is an accomplished HR leader with over 18 years of experience in local and multinational organisations. As Group Head of Human Resources & Administration at Global Rubber Industries (GRI), he has successfully aligned human capital strategies with business objectives, driving HR transformation and fostering a high-performance culture.

One of Udayapriya's key achievements was leading the development and implementation of a cutting-edge Performance Management System (PMS) at GRI. Faced with a growing organisation and outdated systems, he introduced the Objectives and Key Results (OKR) framework, aligning individual and team performance with measurable business outcomes. This shift promoted transparency, accountability, and continuous development, enhancing productivity across departments.

Through collaboration with senior leaders, Udayapriya integrated the new PMS with talent management and leadership development, creating a seamless growth cycle. His approach helped overcome resistance to change by facilitating training sessions and feedback channels. By focusing on measurable outcomes such as employee satisfaction and productivity, Udayapriya ensured the success of the PMS, positioning GRI as a preferred employer and reinforcing HR as a strategic business partner. His leadership continues to drive GRI's success in a competitive global market.

Speaking with TradeFlock, this dynamic HR leader shares further details about his journey so far.

How has your transition to GRI influenced your leadership style?

Transitioning from multinational organisations to GRI was a transformative journey that reshaped my leadership style. In multinationals, leadership was process-driven and hierarchical, whereas GRI's dynamic, locally focused environment required adaptability. I learnt to tailor global frameworks, like performance management systems, to align with GRI's unique culture and objectives.

A key lesson was the power of employee empowerment. Unlike rigid, top-down structures, I fostered open communication and autonomy, particularly when implementing OKRs. This encouraged ownership and innovation, driving business success.



Building high-performance teams became a priority, emphasising collaboration, inclusivity, and leadership development. My experience reinforced the need to align HR strategies with business goals to drive growth and sustain a high-performance culture.

How do you balance HR's strategic and employee well-being roles?

Balancing HR's strategic role and employee well-being is essential for sustainable growth. At GRI, aligning HR strategies with business objectives ensures both performance and employee health.

As a strategic partner, HR drives growth through talent acquisition, leadership development, and succession planning. A data-driven recruitment strategy and leadership pipeline helped scale GRI while maintaining cultural alignment.

On the well-being side, I introduced wellness programmes, flexible hours, and mental health support. Regular check-ins and open-door policies fostered trust.

To integrate both roles, we embedded well-being into performance management and recruited talent aligned with our values. Tracking metrics like satisfaction, turnover, and productivity ensures a thriving, engaged workforce and long-term success.

How do you define a high-performance culture, and what are its key ingredients?

The team is an integral part of my life.

A high-performance culture is built on trust, collaboration, accountability, and a shared commitment to excellence. It empowers employees, fosters innovation, and ensures alignment between individual contributions and organisational goals.

A diverse team is more than a collection of individuals—it's a driver of performance and innovation. Inclusion unlocks this potential by engaging talent, valuing diverse perspectives, and encouraging fresh ideas. At GRI, we define a "constructive" high-performance culture as one rooted in integrity, collaboration, and ethical, sustainable practices.

Leadership plays a crucial role by modelling behaviours, mentoring teams, and investing in continuous development. Talent growth is a priority at GRI, with structured training programmes supporting career advancement. Ownership and accountability promote transparency and trust, while recognition and

feedback boost motivation. Cross-functional collaboration fuels innovation, and a growth mindset ensures adaptability. By embedding these principles, we cultivate a resilient, high-performing culture that drives long-term success and continuous growth.



QUICK FACTS

- Country - Sri Lanka
- Favourite Travel Destinations: France, Italy, Mauritius Island, Japan, New Zealand
- Favourite Cuisine: Creole Cuisine, French-Influenced Cuisine—Baguettes and Pastries, Risotto—Seafood Risotto
- Favourite Books: "How to Win Friends and Influence People" by Dale Carnegie
"Good to Great" by Jim Collins
"Measure What Matters" by John Donrr
"Topgrading 101: Avoid Costly Mis-Hires" by Dr. Brad Smart

How is HR evolving with technology and automation, and how are you preparing for this shift?

As technology and automation continue to transform the workplace, HR at GRI is evolving to become more data-driven and strategic. We leverage Power BI dashboards to analyse data from our HRIS and performance management systems, enabling real-time insights for workforce planning, performance evaluations, and decision-making.

Our performance management system allows us to track employee progress, assess skills, and make informed talent development decisions. By automating data analysis and reporting, HR can focus more on employee engagement, leadership development, and continuous improvement.

To keep up with this digital shift, we are upskilling our HR teams in data analytics and technology-driven decision-making. This ensures that we maximise the potential of our existing HR technologies, improving efficiency while maintaining a strong human-centric approach to talent management.

Despite automation streamlining many processes, we remain committed to fostering a supportive workplace culture, where employee well-being, leadership, and strategic workforce planning remain our top priorities. ♦

THE FALL OF MULTI SPORT ATHLETES

It was July 11, 1989, and the MLB All-Star Game was at its peak, with a 27-year-old athlete about to bat in Anaheim Stadium, California. The pitcher came to the mound with a firm grip on the ball and pitched it. The stadium went silent right before it erupted like a volcano as the batter hit a 448-foot home run, silencing his competitors. The batter was none other than Bo Jackson, the legendary Baseball player. This home run was so astonishing that it got him the All-Star Game MVP honours.

Playing at the highest level of a sport is never easy, but playing in two sports at the very top is virtually impossible. Yet, many athletes throughout modern history have achieved this extraordinary feat. Bo Jackson was one of them. Having played in the MLB and NFL, Bo Jackson is among the few who have had the honour of competing in two sports at the highest level. Some other names that are often discussed in this regard are Michael Jordan, Jonty Rhodes, and many others.

An overview of Multi-Sports Athletes

In the past, the sports world was populated by athletes

who defied the boundaries of single-sport specialisation. Historical figures like Jim Thorpe, active in the early 1900s, exemplify this era. Thorpe, a member of the Sac and Fox Nation, won gold medals in the pentathlon and decathlon at the 1912 Olympics and went on to play professional football and baseball, showcasing unparalleled versatility. Similarly, Babe Didrikson Zaharias, active in the 1930s and 1950s, secured Olympic gold medals in track and field in 1932 and later transitioned to a professional golf career, winning 10 LPGA major championships.

Moving to more recent history, Bo Jackson and Deion Sanders, active in the 1980s and 1990s, are iconic examples. Jackson played simultaneously in the NFL for the Los Angeles Raiders and in MLB for teams like the Kansas City Royals, earning All-Star honours in both. Sanders, similarly, played in the NFL for teams like the Atlanta Falcons and in MLB for the New York Yankees and Atlanta Braves, demonstrating

the feasibility of dual-sport careers during this period. These athletes were not just participants; they dominated, leaving a lasting legacy across multiple arenas.

Current Landscape and the Reason for Decline

Although there have been numerous examples of athletes who played two or more sports at the highest level, the feat is now rare. People generally compete in two formats of the same sport, but not two or more different sports altogether. For example, during his career, Usain Bolt competed in multiple Olympic competitions, but never switched sports. He mostly competed in the 100m sprint and 400m relay.

To understand why this is the case, examining statistics and data is extremely important. For instance, the batting average of MLB batters in the 1990s was around 0.270. However, in the 2010s, the average decreased to 0.255, despite players having significantly more training and better equipment. This is mainly because the level of competition has increased significantly, making it much harder to score today.

Let's take Basketball as an example. Michael Jordan, widely regarded as the greatest basketball player of all time, set numerous records during his career. However, today, most of those records have been broken by LeBron James. Even still, LeBron is not the greatest of all time. This is because the level of competition has increased a lot. What was once considered legendary is now merely a criterion to make the cut.

This is why multi-sports athletes are a rare breed today. Moreover, specialisation is what athletes want now. Data from the Aspen Institute indicates that the share of children ages 6 to 12 playing a team sport regularly dropped from 41.5% in 2011 to 37% in 2017, reflecting a broader move toward specialisation.

Another reason why you don't see multi-sports athletes at the top of the food chain is the timing of the events. The MLB and NFL seasons overlap significantly, making it challenging for athletes to participate in both sports. Similarly, someone who plays soccer cannot play in the NBA, as the latter takes place throughout the year.

An Era Long Lost

The era of the multi-sport athlete, once vibrant with figures like Thorpe and Jackson, has waned, driven by specialisation, professional demands, and cultural shifts. While youth participation data shows benefits, the professional landscape in 2025 reflects a scarcity of dual-sport stars. This evolution prompts reflection on whether sports culture can adapt to encourage versatility, perhaps through policy changes or cultural shifts, to revive the multi-sport athlete and enrich athletic development. ♦



WHAT IF WE BUILT ORGANISATIONS AROUND SKILLS, NOT ROLES?



Imagine a workplace where your value isn't tethered to your job title but to the unique skills you bring to the table. This isn't a futuristic fantasy—it's the emerging reality as organisations worldwide pivot towards skills-based models, redefining traditional structures and compensation systems.

The Shift Towards Skills-Based Organisations

Traditional job roles, with their rigid descriptions and hierarchical structures, are increasingly seen as impediments to agility and innovation. According to Deloitte's research, only 19% of business executives and 23% of workers believe that work is best structured through jobs. Instead, a growing number of organisations are adopting skills-based models, focusing on the capabilities individuals possess rather than their job titles.

Driving Forces Behind the Transition

A skills-based approach offers several strategic advantages for organisations. According to Deloitte Insights, companies adopting this model are 57% more likely to be agile, allowing them to respond swiftly to evolving market demands. By shifting the focus from credentials and tenure to actual skills, businesses can also foster greater equity and inclusion—reducing bias and promoting fairness in hiring and career progression. Furthermore, aligning tasks with individual capabilities enhances talent utilisation, leading to increased productivity and improved employee satisfaction.

Real-World Applications

Major corporations are leading the way, as IBM and Walmart have both joined initiatives like the Rework America Alliance, removing degree requirements from certain roles to focus on skills. On the other hand, Accenture is investing in identifying and developing skills across its workforce, recognising the need for new mindsets and support structures to lead through these shifts.

Challenges and Considerations

Transitioning to a skills-based model presents its challenges. One major hurdle is the assessment and validation of skills—organisations must establish reliable methods to accurately evaluate capabilities and ensure the right fit between employees and tasks. Additionally, moving away from traditional hierarchies demands a significant cultural shift, requiring strong leadership buy-in and active employee engagement. Another critical component is technology integration; implementing robust systems to track, manage, and update skills data is essential for supporting and sustaining this new model effectively.

The Future of Work

As the workplace continues to evolve, embracing a skills-based approach offers a pathway to greater flexibility, inclusivity, and efficiency. By valuing the unique capabilities of individuals, organisations can unlock untapped potential and drive innovation in an increasingly competitive landscape. ♦



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