



Ellyn J. Shook, Chief Leadership and Human Resources Officer of of Accenture

Strategic CHRO: Reimagining Work to Elevate Rather than Eliminate Humans

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For the next installment of our interview series with leaders who are transforming the role of the chief human resources officer, David Reimer, the CEO of The ExCo Group, and I sat down recently with [Ellyn J. Shook](#) of Accenture. She has powerful insights about how to use technology for "work planning" rather than "workforce planning." Stay tuned for more interviews with other HR leaders.

Reimer: What does the phrase "strategic CHRO" mean to you?

Shook: I believe we need to stop using that language because there can be no other choice today. HR leaders must be working on business strategy, because people truly are a company's greatest competitive advantage in this fourth industrial revolution we're living through.

HR leaders sit at the crossroads of the rise of artificial intelligence and can really predict whether a company is going to elevate their humans or eliminate their humans. We have a true obligation as business leaders to really help organizations think about how to use the intelligent technologies to elevate humans.

Bryant: What does your crystal ball look like on AI's long-term role in business and the economy?

Shook: We believe there will be a net-job gain, essentially, but there's a pretty long, dark tunnel you need to navigate in order to get to the end. In our research on CEOs, they increased investment in intelligent technologies in 2017 by 67 percent, but only 3 percent of CEOs were increasing the investment in new-skilling their people. That gap really needs to close in order to get to the bright light at the end of the tunnel.

"The real value that can be unlocked lies in human beings and intelligent technologies working together."

We're starting to see new roles and capabilities in our own organization, and we're seeing a whole new way of doing what we call work planning. We've stopped doing workforce planning. The real value that can be unlocked lies in human beings and intelligent technologies working together.

Bryant: Can you elaborate on the difference between work planning and workforce planning?

Shook: If you think about how workforce planning is getting done today, by and large you look at how many people you need. But the work isn't only going to be done by human beings. So you look at the uniquely human skills and capabilities that are needed to actually complete the work with the help of technology, and you invest in those skills.

Reimer: If you were giving a talk at an HR conference, what would be your advice to the audience?

Shook: There are three things that I think HR leaders and companies need to do. The first is to view everything through the lens of hyper-personalization. I know many people say that, but we have 460,000 people and we need to be hyper-personal.

"Organizations have not always been known to be transparent with their people, but transparency builds trust."

The second is transparency. Organizations have not always been known to be transparent with their people, but transparency builds trust. And the third goes hand-in-glove with that, which is asking for input and listening to really engage with our people. It means not

assuming that we, as a global management committee, understand what it is our people want and need.

We crowdsourced through the cloud and social media to start a conversation about the skills and capabilities that we need for our transformation to a digital company. We asked our own people and candidates in our talent network very simple questions about what constitutes the ideal experience for them.

The output from that exercise formed our roadmap for change throughout our performance management. We democratized our learning. We created an open marketplace so people could move around inside. About 85 percent of our employees are millennials and Gen Z, and we had to wake up pretty quickly to the future and allow them to create the roadmap of change for us.

Bryant: What were the biggest surprises to you from millennials?

Shook: The rhetoric on millennials is that you hire them, invest in them and then they're going to leave. They're job-hoppers with no loyalty. But we didn't find that at all. They want opportunity. If you hire ambitious people, then get out of their way and let them do what you've hired them to do. We had to change our leadership DNA to enable that.

The biggest thing it taught us to do was to move from the one-Accenture culture of standard "rules, tools and schools" to more of a culture of cultures. That's a huge change in a professional services organization. We did a lot of work on our leadership DNA. When we were a large-scale systems integrator, we emphasized standardization, because that is what our clients were looking for.

It required a very hierarchical approach to leadership, and our people were like an army, with generals and soldiers. But in this world, we needed to really flatten the organization experience and collaborate not only within Accenture but across our ecosystem to execute with a lot more agility.

Reimer: The logic of the transformation you described is impeccable, but a lot of smart companies get the logic but struggle to execute the pivot. Can you give us a flavor of how you attacked the change?

Shook: We made a decision early on to invest in our own people and new-skill our own people. I'll share a short story about that. We have an area of our business called Accenture Operations, and five years ago, they were essentially transaction processors for accounts payable and accounts receivable. We saw automation coming, but our employees were doing a lot of repetitive work. We said, this is not going to last and we've got to do something.

So we presented an innovation challenge to them, and said that if you automate the work you're doing, we'll train you to do something else. We gave them automation architects and some training, and we had no idea what was going to happen. We thought people would pull in and be scared.

But in the first round, 16,000 people automated their work, and we trained everyone to do one of five new things. People love it because if they can figure out how to automate the work they're doing, they get to be trained to do something more interesting. It showed them that we were investing in our people to give them new skills.

Reimer: Over the course of your career, were there leaders you worked for who created headwinds for you to do the kind of work you wanted to do?

Shook: No, because that's thinking like a victim. It may sound corny, but I believe you have power over yourself, and no one else has power over you. To say that you had a leader who limited you just meant that you didn't use your full creativity to figure out how to influence or get them to understand a different point of view. I've worked for very tough leaders who didn't always see my perspective, which is fine, but I've always learned from them.

Reimer: That point of view is unusual. A lot of very senior leaders still point fingers to their bosses as an excuse or to blame them for problems. Where does that come from in your background?

Shook: One person who has very much affected my life is my dad, who passed away five years ago. He was a superintendent of schools. He signed the integration orders on the district where I went to school. He was very courageous, and very much a believer in equality for all. He brought high school education to the jail system. I feel very fortunate to be in a place where not only is it an opportunity to make a difference but it's an obligation.

My dad's passion is also my personal passion, and it is a very important business issue for us. A belief in equality for all has really come from my dad, and I feel very fortunate to be in a place where not only is it an opportunity to make a difference, but it's an obligation. I do in some ways feel I'm carrying his legacy on.

Bryant: What is your best interview question for job candidates?

Shook: When is the last time you learned something new and what was it? We need two things at Accenture. One is high intellectual curiosity. You need to want to learn. And the other is high aspiration. If someone says that the last time they learned something was when they were in school, we're not hiring that person. And I don't care what people learn. It might be how to play bridge or how to play tennis or how to code. Whatever it is, it means to me that they are curious and that we can teach them to learn.