

Episode 228: The Value of VR for Training and Employee Development



Episode Link: <http://workology/ep228-wp>

Intro: [00:00:00.3] Welcome to the Workology podcast, a podcast for the disruptive workplace leader. Join host Jessica Miller-Merrell, founder of Workology.com as she sits down and gets to the bottom of trends, tools and case studies for the business leader, HR and recruiting professional who is tired of the status quo. Now, here's Jessica with this episode of Workology.

Intro: [00:00:26.49] The Workology podcast is sponsored by WorkMarket, an ADP company.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:00:31.76] The VR industry is one I've been diving into deep, and more companies are looking to invest in virtual reality as a way to train, develop and engage their team members, whether they are working onsite or remotely. Last year, Forbes announced that 2019 was the year that "virtual got real." They proudly announced that VR would reach 98.4 million consumers by 2023. Now, we have seen so many consumer industry trends that have moved from the consumer side into HR. I think of social media and technologies like Facebook to Facebook and Work and the evolution into Teams, and so on. It's one thing to talk about trends in the consumer marketplace, but it's another to talk about real case studies, which is why I'm so excited to have my guest on board to talk with us about what some of the most innovative companies are doing in terms of developing VR applications in the workplace. This episode is part of our Future of Work series powered by PEAT, the Partnership on Employment and Accessible Technology. In honor of the upcoming 30th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act this July, we're investigating what the next 30 years will look like for people with disabilities at work and the potential of emerging technologies to make workplaces more inclusive and accessible. Today, I'm joined by George Karalis. George is a senior product manager at STRIVR. George is responsible for all of STRIVR's immersive learning products, driving effective and scalable training experiences in virtual reality. George, welcome to the Workology podcast.

George Karalis: [00:02:13.5] Thanks for having me, Jessica.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:02:15.3] Can you tell us a little bit about your background and how you got involved in virtual reality?

George Karalis: [00:02:20.16] Sure. So, the first immersive technology I worked with was a technology called binaural synthesis for simulating 3-D sound. For my honors thesis in college, I studied how we could use that technology to develop sound-only 3-D games to connect blind and sighted people in new ways. So it was not VR, but another immersive technology. And I'll be honest, I had no idea at the time that that technology would become widespread in virtual reality a couple of years later. So I might have missed my first chance to work on VR. But a couple of years later, I was working at Microsoft and I saw the HoloLens for the first time. And that's a mixed reality headset that superimposes holograms into your physical space. And it brought me back to the ideas I was thinking about in college. And it clicked for me that VR and immersive tech more broadly isn't just a gaming accessory or even just a new technology, but really it's a fundamentally new and differentiated medium that can enable us to do things that no other media can. And I got really interested in how we could use this technology to make us more productive in new ways. So I jumped at the chance to work on mixed and virtual reality at Microsoft. I worked on the first version of WebVR, which is now WebXR, and that's a way for developers to create VR experiences that run in the browser like websites. Then I worked on immersive workplace apps and was part of developing a couple of products that are now

part of the Dynamics 365 line of business platform. And then I came across STRIVR, which I found really exciting because they had not only identified a use case where VR was uniquely better than what's currently out there, and that's training, but they had built a real business around it and they had customers and a lot of users. And I saw that that was pushing the medium forward. So I joined STRIVR about a year and a half ago as product manager for immersive experiences. And we've done a lot of cool stuff.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:04:22.09] Tell us about the history of STRIVR. How, how did the company come to be in such a new space? That is virtual reality.

George Karalis: [00:04:30.16] Yeah. So STRIVR was founded out of Stanford's virtual reality lab as a way to train athletes. Our founder and CEO, Derek Belch, was working on a master's degree while working as an assistant coach for the Stanford football team, and he would set up 360 video cameras on the football field. And later, players could go into VR and experience those plays over and over again to get more reps in. And coaches could also see what was happening and where the players were looking in VR, to coach them more effectively. So STRIVR was born out of that project, and in its first year, we had more than 20 sports teams in the NFL and in college football, even the NBA, training with VR. And it became clear that using VR for learning could extend way beyond sports. Wal-Mart was our first enterprise customer. Back in 2016, they saw what STRIVR was doing with football and realized that the same things that were making athletes successful training with VR could apply to their employees. So STRIVR pivoted to enterprise and that's where we've been focused ever since. And just recently we raised a Series B round of funding, which has been really exciting for us, and we've seen a lot of activity across the industry as well.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:05:45.89] First off, I'm going to win so many wife points because I now have insights into VR and the work that STRIVR, which was born out of involving the football team, which I think is really exciting. And then I love that Walmart thought this was a fantastic idea in terms of learning and development for employees. Can you talk us through how Walmart has used VR in their workplaces?

George Karalis: [00:06:16.45] Sure, so the use case that we started with for Wal-Mart was preparing associates for the holiday rush. So think Black Friday. Around the holiday season, Wal-Mart is hiring tons of new people and most associates don't have any experience with that kind of situation. So the first training module was really just a 360 video of what Black Friday is like in a Wal-Mart store. And the first time I saw it, I thought it was staged because it was so crowded. People were getting angry and yelling. It was really stressful. And that's really the point, to experience what it's like during that rare situation that's hard to prepare for otherwise. So Wal-Mart started training in a few of their training academies and then expanded to all 200 of their training academies across the country. And then in 2018, they expanded to all of their stores, more than 4000 across the country. And they train now on a wide range of different things from operational things like checkout procedures to emergency preparedness, to more of the soft skills side, like building empathy for customers or helping managers practice having difficult conversations with employees.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:07:29.04] I love that. I really see the value. And as somebody who has worked in HR, in retail, there is, it is that crazy, that Black Friday and the rush, although it's changed over the years since I first worked in retail. Because really I think I worked in retail on one of the first Black Fridays and Cyber Mondays.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:07:47.55] At least Cyber Monday anyway. The Internet was, and online shopping was, really coming into play. What are, what are some other ways that your clients are using VR to train and engage employees?

George Karalis: [00:08:01.44] It's a pretty wide range. We work with every customer to identify the use cases that will be most impactful to their business. I think there's probably four categories that we talk about the

most. Safety is the biggest one. If you're trying to identify safety hazards on a factory floor, for example, that's a really good use case. Operational efficiency is another one. Any process or procedure can be taught pretty effectively with VR. And we see that a lot. Customer service, I mentioned building empathy with customers or dealing with angry customers, is the use case we see a lot. And then in the soft skills space, we're doing more with having difficult conversations or practicing diversity and inclusion. Those kind of things.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:08:47.3] This is great. I mean, all, all things that I see a lot of times in HR, and I think our listeners will agree, that we are doing maybe kind of practice sessions where you kind of walk through a situation, but you can do that through virtual reality technology and it's going to feel a lot more real than it did if we're sitting in a room in groups, walking through different scenarios.

George Karalis: [00:09:14.21] Absolutely. These are things that are often hard to practice in other ways or not really that realistic if you're practicing in a role play, for example. So being able to go into a VR simulation and experience more context of what that situation is really like. It can be very effective.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:09:31.98] Role playing was the word that I was trying to, to wrap my head around, but yeah, I think I can see the use case for sure with VR in these different situations. In this podcast, we're talking not just about virtual reality, but also accessibility as it relates to virtual reality. So I wanted to ask you about how accessibility is playing into VR right now and then maybe provide some examples about how STRIVR is making this a priority in their VR inclusiveness.

George Karalis: [00:10:05.61] Sure. Accessibility is really important to us. And I think there's a couple of reasons for that. First, it kind of has to be, because we have a lot of different users. We've trained at this point over a million people with VR, and these are regular people who work in regular jobs at companies like Wal-Mart or Verizon or FedEx. Our users are diverse and they have a range of backgrounds and levels of experience and skills and abilities and disabilities. So we have to make sure that our products are accessible for them. But beyond that, I think there's a broader reason why accessibility is really important right now and the role that we and others in the immersive technology space have to play. So I mentioned at the beginning, I believe VR is a fundamentally new medium and we're currently defining what it can do. So I think we have a responsibility to make sure that we're not creating this new technology just for the people who can afford it right now. And I hope that our work at STRIVR can help drive the industry forward and develop this technology in a way that makes it an inclusive medium that values the diversity of everyone.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:11:14.1] How are you working with employers who are using VR that need to make accommodations?

George Karalis: [00:11:19.23] So I think one good example is accommodating deaf and hard of hearing employees. One of our larger customers came to us pretty early on in our partnership with them, saying that they have a considerable number of employees who are deaf or hard of hearing and that our VR platform needs to accommodate for them. Naturally closed captions are pretty much the widely accepted way to provide accommodations for deaf and hard of hearing users, especially with digital media. But there definitely isn't a totally solid, accepted way to provide captions on immersive content. So we started by conducting research and looking what had been done before, prototyping, testing different solutions. We also joined a group that formed last year at the World Wide Web Consortium, the W3C, focused on defining guidelines for immersive captioning. And we came up with a solution that we think is pretty good. We're piloting it now and it seems to be as good as anything else out there. But there definitely are things that make accessibility with immersive technology different and more challenging. For example, in VR, we found that there's a lot more competing for your attention and it can be hard to focus on the captions. So it's a start, but we know there's a lot more work we need to do to make our product more accessible. And that's a

challenge facing everybody in the industry right now. But it's also encouraging to see groups like the one I mentioned at the W3C, and also the XR Access initiative, bringing people together to work on those problems.

Break: [00:12:50.84] Let's take a reset. This is Jessica Miller-Merrill. And you are listening to the Workology podcast. Today we're talking with George Karalis about how employers can use virtual reality. This podcast is sponsored by WorkMarket. They're an ADP company. And it is also part of our Future Of Work series in partnership with the Partnership on Employment and Accessible Technology, or PEAT.

Break: [00:13:14.75] You have a handle on your W-2 employees but what about all of those 1099 contractors? With WorkMarket your company gains visibility into your extended workforce. Learn more at [Workmarket.com](https://workmarket.com).

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:13:31.9] One of the things that I think HR people that are listening to this podcast are thinking about is technology implementation. This is another new piece of technology and implementing that can be a challenge in the workplace. What are some ways that you help clients make that technology adoption process easier?

George Karalis: [00:13:53.62] It's a really good point. So these days, anybody can buy some headsets and it's getting easier to develop VR content. But adopting VR in the workplace, especially at scale, is a lot trickier than I think most people give it credit for. So I'd say a couple of things. First, it does take a commitment from the organization to build out the infrastructure, to really see the value of immersive learning clearly. And that requires executive alignments and it requires some upfront investment in the equipment and in the content development. Having the right executive sponsor is a key requirement anytime we start working with a new customer. And then second, you have to be prepared for everything it takes to implement VR into your organization. At STRIVR, we offer what we call our end-to-end solution, where we don't just provide VR hardware or just provide content or distribution. We do it all end to end. So that includes everything from starting with strategic planning and creating an adoption plan to identifying the most impactful use cases and developing curricula, to the immersive content design and development, to hardware procurement, provisioning, deployment, support. There's "train the trainer." And then once you're actually training, we also provide data analytics and insights to measure the success of the training program and ultimately measure the ROI back to the customer's business. So it's a lot. If you work with STRIVR, we take care of most of it for you. And in the end, it's still a commitment. But for the organizations that are willing to go on that journey, we find that really all of them have had great success.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:15:34.96] I love that you mention data, the importance of measuring success. Because you might not think about that when you think about virtual reality. Like what types of metrics would you measure in these kinds of situations? So it's not just the cool tech, but it's how it's helping the organization train, develop, or whatever the ultimate goal was that you set out for.

George Karalis: [00:15:59.91] Yeah. And we believe that's a huge opportunity. We try to come up with evaluation plans for every program that we create and we're tracking all kinds of data in the headset from the things that people select, but also where they're looking, how they're moving in the simulation, and we can use that to assess their skills or get richer insights about what they're doing.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:16:20.53] I love it. With, with so many people working remote right now, I mean, we're, most of us are stuck at home, staying in place for the moment. How do you feel like the work you're doing at STRIVR is changing in terms of remote work for clients and companies?

George Karalis: [00:16:40.92] Yeah. So we're definitely in a crazy time right now. And I mentioned before that a lot goes into making immersive learning successful in an organization, especially now. So I don't think we're at the point where sending a bunch of headsets out to individuals will necessarily be effective. But we are trying some things out and we're focused on what's going to be the most effective for each of our customers. So for one of our new customers, we're sticking to their original program schedule and we're sending headsets to people to train the trainers so that when they do start training in person, they'll be ready. And this definitely comes into play with sports as well, since teams can't practice on the field anymore. So athletes are taking headsets home to get some practice in. I think at a higher level, we believed it would be another five or 10 years before it's reasonable to think that every employee would have a headset, like to have a computer or a phone today. But maybe this situation will speed that timeline up.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:17:40.35] Interesting. Well, I mean, that's a lot of new tech to requisition. I am sure that listeners are thinking like, oh my gosh, I've just had to buy new monitors for, you know, three thousand people to stick into their office or new laptops. Now, I have to think about a VR headset. That could be complicated.

George Karalis: [00:18:00.67] Yeah, I definitely don't think we're there quite yet, but it might get people thinking about it for the next time. Hopefully there isn't one.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:18:08.26] Yeah, well, I think more people will be staying remote once all this is over. Or they'll be more open to flexible scheduling and they're going to need some of that, those simulations and environments like you're talking about with virtual reality.

George Karalis: For sure.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: One of the things that we do for each episode of the podcast as part of the Future of Work series with PEAT, as we are looking at what the next 30 years of work will look like and what emerging workplace trends or technologies are coming. And so I ask every person we interview, so I'll ask you. As we look towards the next 30 years of work, what emerging workplace trends or technologies do you think will have the biggest impact on people with disabilities?

George Karalis: [00:18:56.55] Well, 30 years is a really long time, Jessica. So we'll see. There's a few things I would say about immersive technology and the Future of Work. So first, there's the hiring process. We know that your performance in a job interview is often not a good predictor of how you'll actually do on the job. So I hope that in the future we'll use immersive technology and also AI for skills assessments in simulated work environments that will ultimately result in better and more equitable hiring practices. That goes back to a lot of the data we're collecting and the analysis we can do with that data. And that's an area that STRIVR is investing deeply in right now. Second, I'm betting that VR becomes commonplace for employee training. And the benefit of that kind of format is that it's adaptable. So you can get the benefits of experiential learning, that's more like hands-on learning, but with the accommodations that are afforded by digital media. And again, I hope that we can develop this medium in a way that's accessible from the start. And then third, as we see augmented and mixed reality mature, we have an opportunity to support employees on the job. So going back to the captioning example, it's likely we'll have technology like glasses in the future where we can overlay real-time captions as people are speaking, which would open up new possibilities for deaf and hard of hearing people. So I'm optimistic about the possibilities for the future. And really, this technology is still so new that there's so much left for us to continue to discover.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:20:30.85] I like what you're thinking now and you're right. Thirty years is a long time. I mean, we'll, I don't think I'll be retired, but man, I'll be a completely different person by that point and living in a whole new world.

George Karalis: [00:20:44.55] Yes. Yeah. Things will be different for sure.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:20:47.46] Well, George, thank you so much for taking the time to talk with us today. Where can people go to learn more about you and the work that you're doing at STRIVR?

George Karalis: [00:20:55.65] Definitely visit our website, STRIVR.com. That's STRIVR, we have VR in our name, and there's a variety of e-books and webinars where you can learn more. There is one in particular that listeners might be interested in, a fireside chat with Josh Bersin, discussing the value of VR to the employee experience. So I encourage everyone to check that one out.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:21:18.5] We'll include that one in the, in the resources section of this particular Workology podcast episode. So if you just go to the transcript and summary that we put together for each podcast, we'll have the fireside chat that George is mentioning with Josh there for you to click through and have access to. So, awesome. Thank you so much George, again, for taking the time to talk with us. I love the endless possibilities that VR provides when it comes to employee engagement, training and development, and hiring. There are a lot of great new things on the horizon.

George Karalis: [00:21:58.32] Absolutely. Thanks for having me, Jessica.

Closing: [00:22:01.31] The Workology podcast Future of Work series is supported by PEAT, the Partnership on Employment and Accessible Technology. PEAT's initiative is to foster collaboration and action around accessible technology in the workplace. PEAT is funded by the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy, ODEP. Learn more about PEAT at Peatworks.org. That's Peatworks.org.

Closing: [00:22:29.78] VR offers the ability to provide employees with real time simulation training, not to mention amazing job training, skill development opportunities and really adding to the employee experience. The future of VR is so bright and I look forward to hearing how you are applying VR in your workplace. The Future of Work series is in partnership with PEAT and it is one of my favorites. Thank you to PEAT as well as our podcast sponsor, WorkMarket, an ADP Company.