

Ep 251: How to Make Work Human When We're Leading Remote Teams



Intro: [00:00:00.33] 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.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:00:25.65] Welcome to the Workology podcast sponsored by Workology. We've spent the last several months supporting our teams who are dispersed and working from home due to the coronavirus. HR leaders have been faced with how we train employees who have never worked remotely, how we ensure those employees have the resources they need to do their jobs from home, and how we can help them be more productive. Not to mention just employees, but leaders too. What is extremely important and what I want to talk about today is how we can help keep the human, not just in human resources, but the humanity in everything we do, including the workplace, especially when things have gone remote and virtual. Today, we're talking with Derek Irvine. He's the senior vice president of Work Human, the world's fastest growing social recognition and continuous performance management platform. Derek, welcome to the Workology podcast.

Derek Irvine: [00:01:21.13] Thank you very much. Delighted to be here.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:01:23.62] As we adjust to the new normal of working for home, what's the first thing we as HR leaders should focus on when supporting our employees?

Derek Irvine: [00:01:32.41] Sure. But as I said, there's been this giant pivot to the digital world thanks to covid. So I would think everybody is kind of beyond the getting everybody, the technology and the access that they need. I'd also imagine, you know, from a general point of view, there's enough bureaucracy, there's enough systems in place. And exactly as you said, I would suggest the key thing to focus on is do we have enough human? Do we have enough of that human connection happening between our people? Because, of course, people are now working at home. It can feel quite lonely. The usual opportunity to have a pal, a friend at work and a chat, the spontaneous meeting, you know, those are all much more difficult. So I would encourage HR leaders to focus on human connection and making sure that we're creating really good human moments in the workplace because they that they still matter a lot.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:02:25.39] Speaking of human, you have a new book out, it's called "Making Work Human: How Human Centered Companies Are Changing the Future of Work and the World". What is the book about and how does it play into that human element in the workplace?

Derek Irvine: [00:02:38.53] So the book is about, as you describe, bringing more humanity into the workplace. You know, when you think about how we've been managing our workplaces for many decades, we've kind of been managing them against the grain of humanity. We've been putting in place controlled systems, bureaucracy. You know, there was this idea that you kind of had to check your real self in at the door as you came to the workplace. I think all of that is very fundamentally changed now. There's been an awakening to the power of humanity, because at the end of the day, the humans that are in our company, well, you know, they are our product. They are our service. They are the creativity, the innovation. They are the future. So the more that we double down on allowing everybody to bring their full humanity, their full, diverse humanity to the workplace, we're all going to succeed. Ourselves in the workplace we're going to feel better. We're going to feel more fulfilled. And too, it works out from a business perspective because the research shows that businesses that behave in a more human centered way, well they thrive more than those that don't.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:03:42.51] And we should be leading with empathy and being more human, especially right now, but I think moving forward, whenever we get back to whatever is the new normal that it's going to look like.

Derek Irvine: [00:03:56.10] Yeah, so, you know, I think covid is going to give us a little bit of a gift, of course, it's a very stressful time, a very difficult time for all of us. But the one gift I think it will give us is the opportunity to to engage in considerable change. We don't have to go back to the way that we managed in the past. And in many ways, that's what the book is about. It's about accelerating to the perspective of creating human centered organizations, where it's packed full of case studies, packed full of interesting research that, as I mentioned earlier, really proves that those that embrace a more human oriented approach to the workplace, whether those are the organizations that thrive.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:04:34.05] I want to talk a little bit about making leading remote teams more human. I think one of the challenges that we have is we're all communicating via Zoom calls and through screens. So we don't have that in person, you know, run in in the in the kitchen or conversations on the side in the halls. What are your thoughts on how we should maybe be approaching how we engage and connect with each other or even communicate right now?

Derek Irvine: [00:05:07.19] Yes. Well, I think, you know, when you think about leaders wanting to communicate very often, it's the town hall meeting, the big event, the only getting together. Of course, that's super difficult right now. So I really encourage us to trust the humans that work in our organizations and but to give them a platform, to give them a place where they can communicate about the human things that are happening in their lives to each other. And in the book, we we we talk about the power of three really powerful words, that when you engage with these words, which are thanking each other, often talking authentically to each other about things that I saw you did, things that I appreciate and celebrating together,

we create really powerful conversations that help connect each other. So my encouragement would be to allow employees access to that type of of a speaking platform, if you like, where they can talk to each other. It doesn't always have to be leaders to employees. And I think, you know, let's trust our own humans, but give them a platform where they can engage in thanking each other for the great work that's being done, talking to each other about projects that are happening, opportunities for improvement and celebrating our lives together. And those are really three very powerful words that that help create more human connection in the workplace.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:06:30.66] I love that. And it seems very simple. I like the framework that you described. It sounds like something that anybody can do. We just have to be real intentional about it.

Derek Irvine: [00:06:40.50] Exactly. And what's really interesting too, Jessica, is that during covid, you know, we have about 50 million data points of these thanking, talking and celebrating happening on our platform. And we were able to see as covid spread across the world, we could see the messages that employees were exchanging with each other in that interaction. And there were words like at the early stages, like resilience, like stress, like flexibility, keeping the lights on. And, you know, so clearly a very difficult time where people had to rely upon the resilience. But what's really super encouraging, as the months and weeks went passed, we started to see that vocabulary change to friendship, support, guidance, compassion. Those were some of the key words that were coming up in all the messages that employees were exchanging with each other. So you can see a mood change straight away in the data. And you know, that, too, is one of the exciting things for HR leaders is that you're not only putting in place a framework where you're allowing humans to create connection moments, moments that matter, moments of truth between each other. But those moments can create great insights for the leaders to understand the mood of their organization, to understand how people are really holding up, and to be able to to make changes that might be needed as a result.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:07:56.43] This is awesome. I love the fact that we're providing a platform for them to be able to communicate using, you guys, this technology. But then also as business leaders, we are able to get access and some insights into what people are talking about. So instead of the annual employee survey that comes out once a year or the series of focus groups, I think we can still do those. These all are important. But now you can really see in real time what people are thinking and talking about. That's powerful.

Derek Irvine: [00:08:29.64] Well, exactly. And within the Work Human cloud, we do have a specific product that's called a mood tracker, which is just as you described. It's a pulse survey on topics like resilience in the workplace, like your culture right now, levels of engagement. But it's done in a light sort of 12 questions to constantly keep a track of the annual, you know, the annual engagement survey. As we well know, the, what's the key problem? Well, it's annual. You know, things change so quickly, but you're absolutely spot on, Jessica. I think aside from them, the tremendous insight that we see from thanking, talking, celebrating is the really sort of human moment, creating verbs. And as you have these human moments, to be able to drill down and be able to see who's got the greatest connected network across the organization because they tend to celebrate their colleagues a lot, or teams work together a lot. You get an opportunity to see the soft skills of colleagues as people are calling out a congratulatory message. You get to see people that may be extremely strong emotional quotient or people that are really strong in innovation. The insights are

enormous and I think in today's human but yet technologically driven world, it's those insights when when you combine the technology and the human together that can create great competitive advantage.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:09:53.71] I want to ask you about an activity that I think for leaders can be really challenging and it often can be uncomfortable. And those are performance management, whether it's a review or a conversation. I wanted to ask, how do we help make these conversations more human? Because I think sometimes we like to just be a little bit more robotic. But everything that you're saying is we need to bring the humanity back into the workplace, which includes conversations about maybe good performance as well as bad performance. How do we do that? What do you suggest?

Derek Irvine: [00:10:25.78] Absolutely. I completely agree with you, Jessica. We got to be talking about the good performance to you know, I'm always extraordinarily amazed that there's people out there that sometimes come to us and say we're looking for a feedback tool.

Derek Irvine: [00:10:37.06] And I will say, well, you know, is that the full spectrum of feedback, the positive as well as the developmental, and they're like: Wow! You know, we really want to double down on the developmental opportunity. To me, that's just something crazy. You know, it's the feedback and performance management of my view has to begin with the positivity. I think you have to earn people's trust to receive the other messages. And the way you receive the way you build that trust is by building genuine human connection between the people that are doing the performance management reviews. And our research, our case studies with clients absolutely proves that it's like building a muscle in the gym. When you build a muscle of positivity, you know the relationship just as stronger. The connection is stronger and people are much more willing to then accept the developmental scale changing, role changing, whatever it might be, a conversation that's needed at the other end. So I 100 percent agree. Let's make it more human by talking about the positive and the, well, I just want you to continue, as well as the things that I do want you to change that aren't going so well. It's a full spectrum.

Break: [00:11:48.70] Let's take a reset. This is Jessica Miller-Merrell and you were listening to the Workology podcast sponsored by Workology. Today, we're talking with Derek Irvine about making work human and being able to do that with remote and traditional in-person teams.

Break: [00:12:04.33] Are you studying for your HRCI or SHRM exams? Join our Free HR Certification Study Group on Facebook. Search for HR Certification Study Group, or go to HRCertificationStudyGroup.com. Ace your HR exams with the HR Certification Study Group.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:12:20.92] Speaking of trust, one area that you guys are really strong in, that is the trust that you have built through creating great content and great events. And so this year is a little bit different. Right? And and so you are doing your work human conference now online, which when this airs, it

will have already passed. But can you talk a little bit about the work human conference? Maybe for those who aren't familiar. What's the primary focus and what's the purpose?

Derek Irvine: [00:12:50.11] Yes, well, we've been in business for over 20 years. What we've been focused on bringing "thank you" moments to the workplace, employee recognition moments. But about six years ago, as we, you know, continue to expand our client base, continue to expand our our success with positivity, client said to us, you guys have great perspectives and you're great at being a gathering place where we can bring together people who care about having more humanity in the workplace and to talk about other things that drive humanity in the workplace than just thanking. You know, let's talk about mindfulness. Let's talk about the evolution of performance management, more continuous performance management. Let's talk about office space environments. Let's talk about all of the things that create more human workplaces. So we agreed and six years ago, we launched a conference that where we said, well, we'll open up our marketing resources, but open up our platform to be the gathering place. And we called that conference Work Human Live with about four hundred attendees in the first year at our last physical event. We had about 4000 employees, 4000 attendees, and at our most recent digital event, it's starting to be about 12000 people coming alone. So a lot of people care about bringing more humanity into the workplace. And we're going to continue with that mission. We feel like we're a company with a mission, and that will continue to be the case. We're going to keep doubling down on bringing more humanity to the workplace.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:14:24.01] If you guys haven't been to Work Human Live Conference, which I encourage you to do, so it's just different. Like the conversations are different. They're open. It's not just about processes and documentation and legalize like there is real change happening and you can feel it in the room and just among the attendees. So one of my favorite conferences for sure, it just has a different feel to it, which I feel like is like that's the humanity piece into it. We're leading with the humanity first and everything that you guys are doing as you're putting together such a great event.

Derek Irvine: [00:15:04.78] Yeah. At that conference, we put a great deal of attention in exactly that. It's content and experience because the experience is an opportunity to create human connections at the workplace.

Derek Irvine: [00:15:15.58] And at the conference, and that goes beyond just swapping business cards, so we put a great deal of attention, as you know, into animations and different themes that allow people open up, you know, in terms of who they really are, sharing interests, sharing worries about the workplace, looking for solutions in many groups. It's a big part of our focus that we have opportunities for an experience of human connection too.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:15:43.91] I wanted to ask you as an HR leader, what recommendations can you have for maybe our audience to maybe bring more human into their workplaces, especially right now when I feel like times are really stressful and they're really uncertain, how can they bring that humanity? What are maybe the first steps?

Derek Irvine: [00:16:03.83] Yes, but I kind of mentioned some of this a little bit earlier on of seeking human moments that matter. You know, work is very busy. And once we're all working at home, I think we're finding we're working even more hours than we used to before. So, you know, the projects are pushing on, but look for the human moments that matter the moment to pause, beginning a meeting with, hey, how are you? How's the family? You know, how's the how's the level of stress, you know, look for the moments of humanity as you're starting at those meetings. But as we describe in the book, I really recommend three super powerful words to have in mind as you're managing your team throughout every week. What are opportunities to thank people? Because everybody needs that positive feedback. And too many people, unfortunately, feel unnoticed. You know, they deliver a key moment. They deliver a key project and they kind of think, I'm not even sure that my boss saw me.

Derek Irvine: [00:16:59.93] I'm not even sure the team really noticed that. So everybody needs it. Look out for moments to thank folks for the things that they've done, even the small, small, small things. Secondly, talking to each other authentically. And that's more than has the project or how's the weather where you're living? You know, it's how are things going from a career point of view? How is your role? How is your interaction with other teams? You know, genuine, authentic interest is super powerful. And then the final third words, as I've mentioned, just to celebrate together, because we're spending so much time now in the workplace, it's in our home. We need to make sure that we celebrate the things that are happening in our real human lives, birthdays, graduations, getting a new driving license or some community contribution that you made. So look out for moments that matter. And if you double down on themes of thanking, talking or celebrating, it's super powerful.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:18:00.83] I think that modeling that behavior for what you want the rest of your organization or your leaders to do as a HR leader is also a good first start because they can learn directly from you and see the success that you're having with following these three things.

Derek Irvine: [00:18:18.08] Absolutely. That is absolutely true. I think also we're seeing an evolution in the role of the type of manager that succeeding in this environment. I think our manager was very oriented towards being a coach, a supportive facilitator, I feel is really thriving in the environment now, more so than command and control traditional hierarchical models.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:18:43.33] It makes it really hard to sit on a Zoom call all day just to watch everybody I've seen I've heard some horror stories of managers who are requiring everybody to be on Zoom and then once someone steps away, they immediately call them or text them or message them. And we just I just don't think that we have the mental capacity or the room emotionally for that right now in our lives.

Derek Irvine: [00:19:08.56] That's right. I mean, Zoom is super useful, as we know, but it is a little bit like being on television all day long if you're constantly in front of the camera because you're constantly conscious of how you're looking when you're wearing. So when our company certainly have total flexibility

around so much of that camera at any point, do a walk and talk, put your ear pieces and go out and have a walk in the garden, walk around your neighborhood, but participate in the meeting while you're walking around. It's really important to shake things up a bit, which it's supposed if we were in physical offices, we'd be doing more naturally anyway. You know, sitting in a meeting in an office. You don't feel like you're on CNN with the cameras staring at you, which can be the case with a lot of Zoom.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:19:52.77] Agree. Well, Derek, thank you so much for taking the time to talk with us today. I wanted to ask you about the book, where can people go to get the book? It's called Making Work Human: How Human Centered Companies Are Changing the Future of Work.

Derek Irvine: [00:20:09.86] Yeah, well, certainly the best place is to visit workhuman.com, our website, and the book is also available as everybody can imagine on Amazon and other good-places-selling books.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:20:20.64] I love it and I love the Work Human website. It's just it's just refreshing, like and there's so much great content and resources there. Like I'm scrolling through and I'm seeing all these really great video interviews with different thought leaders and influencers and business professionals. So a lot of great resources for anyone to get started to bring the humanity back into their team and the workplace.

Derek Irvine: [00:20:43.38] Good. Excellent. Thank you, Jessica.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:20:45.66] Yeah. Thanks for taking the time to talk with us today, Derek. I really appreciate it.

Closing: [00:20:49.53] We have made a significant shift in how we work with a newly remote workforce and balancing that with the traditional workforce. And it's challenging to make both experiences uniquely human while helping all our workers, whether they are dispersed or working in person, be more productive. Remote work has become a vital part of probably your company's operations, and I'm glad we've had an opportunity to talk with Derek and get advice on how to make not just remote work, but in-person conversations and connections more human. Thank you for joining the Workology podcast sponsored by Workology. This podcast is for the disruptive workplace leader who's tired of the status quo. My name is Jessica Miller-Merrel. Until next time you can visit Workology.com to listen to all our previous podcast episodes.