

Reshaping HR Norms to Meet New Workplace Needs



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CPA, Columnist, and Host



Jack Kelly

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Announcer:

Welcome to THRIVE, a Paychex Business Podcast, where you'll hear timely insights to help you navigate marketplace dynamics and propel your business forward. Here's your host, Gene Marks.

Gene Marks:

Hey, everybody. Thanks for joining us back at the Paychex THRIVE Podcast. My name is Gene Marks. Hopefully you guys are familiar with my face and my voice at this point of time. Thank you so much for joining us.

Gene Marks:

I am sitting here with Jack Kelly. Jack is the CEO of WeCruitr. Jack, first of all, thank you very much for joining us today.

Jack Kelly:

My pleasure. I'm honored to be here. I've seen a lot of your podcast. You do a great job.

Gene Marks:

Thank you. Thank you. I'm pleased to be here because we have a lot to talk about, about managing employees, and I want to get your input. First of all, so you're the CEO of WeCruitr, which is W-E-C-R-U-I-T-R.com. Correct?

Jack Kelly:

Yeah. I think I got to change it because people have a hard time with that name. I don't know. I think maybe I'll get feedback from the audience, to see all right, maybe it's a little too much of a tongue twister.

Gene Marks:

No, no, no. It kind of works for me. It's good. So what does the company do?

Jack Kelly:

So what happens is, so basically my real job is I'm the CEO of executive search firm, called the Compliance Search Group. We place people, primarily in Wall Street.

Jack Kelly:

It's a small business, really, about a dozen people. We've been doing this for years.

Jack Kelly:

During the pandemic when, as we all know, it was just horrific, especially the early days, when there was just massive layoffs, massive firings, downsizings, I figured, hey, there has to be something we can do to help out.

Jack Kelly:

So, we started WeCruitr, which was a platform, based just to help people during this time period. We didn't charge anything. What we did is, we offered kind of Zoom meetups, where people could ask questions. "Hey, how do I interview? What do I do? How do I keep sane? Is it just me, or is this everybody?"

Gene Marks:

Sure.

Jack Kelly:

We then offered kind of a directory for recruiters, career coaches, resume writers. So, it was really just all about, during that time period, to help out, to show that you're not in it alone, that you have help.

Jack Kelly:

It's one of those things I'm glad we did. Because it's one of these things, I think Gene, looking back 10, 20 years from now, I could feel like, "Hey, at least we tried to make a difference and help people out, who were struggling during the worst time of their life."

Gene Marks:

Yeah. No, I'm really glad to hear that. I know you've learned a lot of things, and you're continuing to learn a lot of things. And as you and I are talking right now, I mean, we're in the midst of such a huge disruption in the workforce and the labor market in general.

Gene Marks:

You wrote a piece for Forbes back in early January, called Leadership Lessons From The Happiest Place In The World.

Gene Marks:

You interviewed a guy named Jesper Zerlang, who's the CEO of LogPoint. Tell me a little bit about that interview and this guy Jesper. What did you learn?

Jack Kelly:

It's really interesting because I didn't know that Denmark and the neighboring countries were so happy, but it does ... I'll take them at their word that they are.

Gene Marks:

Yeah.

Jack Kelly:

It's interesting because Jesper runs a cybersecurity company. So, you would think cybersecurity, maybe a little boring. We all have preconceived notions, but what was really nice and surprising, is that he had a very enlightened, forward-thinking view that, as time progressed, we saw other companies adopted.

Gene Marks:

Hmm.

Jack Kelly:

He laid forth kind of a blueprint, what I've seen with a lot of companies, writing for Forbes over the little last ... during the whole pandemic, of this whole new trend that's happening, Gene.

Jack Kelly:

It's so wild because pre-COVID till now, the way employees are treated was radically different.

Jack Kelly:

Now because there's a war for talent, there's a Great Resignation, companies, their main thing is, how do I attract? How do I retain? How do I recruit people?

Jack Kelly:

And if we don't do a job and what Jesper was saying, he gave kind of guidelines, a blueprint, what to do, in no particular order.

Jack Kelly:

One of the things I really like what he said, is about psychological safety. I got to admit, I didn't know that term until he mentioned it.

Jack Kelly:

With psychological safety, as I understand it, is that, in his organization, you could do something, you could fail and that's okay. You're not going to be bullied by the boss. You're not going to lose your job.

Jack Kelly:

Now, maybe if you did something on purpose, well, that's one thing. But if you did it, and you're just doing your job, but somehow it didn't work out, that's okay. We'll learn from it, and move forward.

Gene Marks:

Right.

Jack Kelly:

Which sounds okay, but when you really think about it for a worker, it makes you feel comfortable.

Jack Kelly:

Like, "Okay, I could try to do something, Gene. I could try this. And if it doesn't work, I don't have to worry about the repercussions, and lose my job." It's so freeing to do.

Gene Marks:

Right. Yeah, it's funny. When it's think about psychological safety, as you say that, I mean, I'm a business owner myself. If somebody is failing too much ...

Gene Marks:

... what does a business owner do in that situation though, Jack?

Gene Marks:

I mean, this guy Jesper says, "Well, listen. You can fail. You've got safety. We're not going to fire you." But isn't there a certain point, where if a person's not doing their job—

Jack Kelly:

Absolutely. Absolutely.

Gene Marks:

How do you reconcile that?

Jack Kelly:

I can tell you from firsthand experience because from my own companies, in terms of hiring and having to let go of people. And then just as an executive recruiter, seeing it all the time, when people come to me.

Jack Kelly:

I think, sometimes the best thing to do is, let's say, Gene, "Sally" is the person. Right away, I would speak to Sally, even though, let's say it didn't work out.

Jack Kelly:

We're having psychological safety. So, I'm not throwing her under the bus. But sit down and explain, "Hey, walk me through why you did this. What happened? What were you thinking?" And try to get a plan, so for the next time, it won't happen again.

Jack Kelly:

Then if it happens again, the next time, then have this follow-up conversation, to see what happens. But then you're kind of making a mental note: alright, okay, twice can be something, maybe. Let's see what's going to happen.

Jack Kelly:

Then, if it goes on again, you might have to sit that person down and say, "Hey, let's get a game plan ... You have to improve. Here's what we need you to improve," and give kind of a list, almost, so it's super clear.

Jack Kelly:

"Here's our expectations. Here's what our expectations when you came in. Here's what we were expecting you to do. Here's the outcome we want to have. We want you to stay here. We want you to be a valuable member of the team, but if you can't do this, I don't know if we could keep you."

Jack Kelly:

So this way, you lay it out. So that, if you do have to let that person go, it doesn't come as a shock. And I think the audience of small business owners could appreciate what I'm going to say next ... is in today's litigious society, it is very easy ... Listen, this is uncomfortable for me to say and might not be politically correct, but this is probably why you want to have people like me on these kind of meetings, so to talk about it.

Jack Kelly:

You have to worry, if you just out of the, seemingly out of the blue, say, "Hey, I'm letting you go," that person may say, "Hey, you're doing it because -" and then they'll fill in the blank. Because of this bias, this prejudice, this what have you, where, that's not the case, but they're going to maybe presume it is.

Jack Kelly:

So, if you lay out the groundwork beforehand, and make sure that everybody is aware of it, document it ... it's sad that you have to do that, but it is what it is.

Jack Kelly:

So this way, when and if it comes time to having to let that person go, it's not a surprise. There was one warning, two warnings, three warnings, everything is documented. It's never pleasant. It's always uncomfortable what it happens, but at least, managing expectations, and that everyone's on the same page.

Gene Marks:

Right. Let's move to some other things you talked about with Jesper. One of the things that you led the column off with, was about the modern hybrid workplace.

Jack Kelly:

Yes.

Gene Marks:

What does that mean, Jack? Does that mean nobody's going to be working from home? Are we not shutting down our offices to have a complete virtual office? It's something in the middle, I guess. Right?

Jack Kelly:

This is ... again, I've been writing a lot about this, a lot. I would say, from what I'm reporting on, maybe 40% of the knowledge workers — now this won't include people who are working in machinery and factories, because they have to go in — but for office workers, they're looking maybe about 20 to 30, if not more, percent, are either going to be hybrid or remote work.

Jack Kelly:

With the hybrid, the way it's playing out with a lot of these firms, it's going to be maybe two, three days in the office, and the rest working from home.

Gene Marks:

Right.

Jack Kelly:

There's a large contingency that is saying, "Hey, I just want remote. And if I don't have remote, I'm going to quit."

Jack Kelly:

That's not an idle threat, Gene, because four million Americans are quitting, pretty much almost every month. And there are 11 million jobs opening. So, if somebody isn't happy and they're feeling, "Hey, I got used to working remotely for the last two years. Now you're making me schlep back into an office. No way. I'm leaving. I'm going somewhere else."

Jack Kelly:

So companies now are in a challenging spot because if they push too hard, they could lose their best and brightest.

Gene Marks:

Right.

Jack Kelly:

But then some companies feel, I need you in the office. It's more productive in the office. But if you push too much, you have to worry about how they're going to take it.

Gene Marks:

So, what's the solution to that, Jack? This is just your opinion. I guess it depends on the company. But I mean, my clients, they're trying to work this out on an employee-by-employee basis.

Gene Marks:

Some people work really well from home, and they can get their jobs done that way. Others actually prefer coming into the office.

Gene Marks:

What do you see your clients do, when it comes to handling a work from home policy?

Jack Kelly:

I find out, probably one of the best ways, is to sit down, as you pointed out and really get the pulse of what the people want.

Jack Kelly:

Because if, let's say you're a working mother and you have young children and here in New York and New Jersey, the schools were closed on and off. They may say, "Hey, Gene, Jack, can I just work remotely? Because this is chaos. I don't know from day to day, whether they're going to go to school or not. It's hard to manage. Let me work from home."

Jack Kelly:

There may be others, like me. I've been working remotely. I can't take it. Gene, if you're my boss, I would say, "Gene, you know what? You know what? I'll come in."

Jack Kelly:

Maybe I'll do just four days, because it's a commute to go from where I live in New Jersey to New York. It takes a while. So, maybe four days I'll come in, and I'd want to get it.

Jack Kelly:

I think, by speaking to your employees and getting a sense of what's important to them, then you can help make a decision, because it's not a one-size-fits-all.

Jack Kelly:

You might have people who want to come in two or three days, or maybe two days or what have you. I think by doing that, it's going to keep the retention level up and mute the attrition level. Because they're going to feel, "Hey, Gene and Jack as the managers, really listen to me. They heard what I had to say, and they offered a way for me to work the best way I can. Now because of that, I'm appreciative. Odds are, I'm going to work even harder, because I want to keep this going on."

Gene Marks:

All of this kind of comes down to another thing that you touched on in this piece in Forbes, is flexibility.

Jack Kelly:

Yes.

Gene Marks:

I mean, it's just, you know, before the pandemic a lot of employers ... Yeah, let's all agree that most small business owners — in fact, more than half of them — are over the age of 50, still.

Gene Marks:

That's what the demographics are showing, according to the Small Business Administration. So, a lot of them are kind of set in their ways. They're used to the old ways of running a business. A lot of younger employees, you know, the millennials and the Gen Z-ers, they're asking for more flexibility. They want to work from home. They want to work remotely, you know, as long as they're getting their job done.

Gene Marks:

We resisted that for a while. The pandemic kind of blew that out of the water, didn't it? It seems like that, the best-run companies, as they look ahead, are saying, "We've got to have the ability to provide flexibility for our employees." Does that make sense?

Jack Kelly:

It does. I think it really boils down to autonomy and freedom. Because Gene, let's say you're my boss, and you give me that choice. I'm going to feel so much better about it than rather you saying, like, for instance — I'm not picking on one company — Wall Street in particular, like Goldman Sachs and J.P. Morgan, are very much, "We want you back in. We want you to come in."

Jack Kelly:

Even if you want to come in, you don't want to be scolded and chided to come in. You want that choice. So, I think if you offer choice and you say, "Hey, if this is how you're going to work best, do it."

Jack Kelly:

But then, you monitor it. Make sure, because then, let's say I'm not doing a good job working remotely. Then, you're well within your rights to tell me, "Hey Jack, you know what? I gave you all the freedom, all the autonomy to work remotely, but the output? Let's talk about it. Let's figure this out. If you want to work remotely, I can still try to figure out how I could keep you remote, but we got to kind of get the production up."

Jack Kelly:

So again, I think it boils down to having that interaction with the individuals, to make sure that they're empowered, and they feel confident in what they're doing. And if not, to have some checks and balances in place.

Gene Marks:

We're talking about having an environment where there's psychological safety. We're talking about an environment that is hybrid, as much as we can make it, where people have the ability to work from home a couple days a week. We're talking about being flexible with our employees.

Gene Marks:

These are all key things that we have to have in consideration, when we're recruiting people, in a time where finding people are really tough and of course, retaining our employees as well.

Gene Marks:

There are a few other things you brought out in this column, as well. You talked about diversity. Tell us why diversity is so important, Jack.

Jack Kelly:

What's really interesting is that, with a lot of these things, there's the pros and the cons. On one side, what's happening ... This happened early on, when Twitter was saying ... early days, like March of 2020, "Hey, we're going to let you work remote. You can work from anywhere you want." But then they offer, we could recruit from wherever we want.

Jack Kelly:

So what happens is this: if you're a worker, and you're used to a certain area, I'm competing against people in my... draw a circle around the commuting distance.

Gene Marks:

Sure.

Jack Kelly:

It's competition. But now, you're competing against the whole world, so then it becomes a little tougher. So the companies, in a way, have the flexibility to say, "Hey, I could get from anywhere in the country." The subtext is, "Huh, maybe if they're living in a place in another country that's really cheap, I don't have to pay them that much. I could save money."

Jack Kelly:

But then, for someone who lives in the US, it's a little tough, because now I'm competing with everybody. So, it's a weird thing.

Jack Kelly:

To go back to your point about diversity is, once you can recruit anywhere for a job, you could get anybody you want.

Jack Kelly:

To me, diversity doesn't necessarily mean black, white, pink, green, this. It means someone who's in rural Arkansas, who's a brilliant software person, who can't get a job in Silicon Valley because they want to be with their family, and they don't want to go to Silicon Valley. Now, that person could work in Silicon Valley, for a tech company.

Gene Marks:

Sure.

Jack Kelly:

So, it does open up a lot of doors, where you could have diversity of thought, diversity in terms of religions, races, sizes, shapes, everything. Because now, you're not just pulling from one small group that could commute into your office.

Gene Marks:

Tell me about collaboration as well. I mean, you put together all of these people from all around the country, maybe even around the world. What did Jesper say about collaboration and how it's impacted his company? What is he doing?

Jack Kelly:

I'm saying not only with Jesper, but across the board, this is something that is evolving. Because on one hand, by collaborating, you kind of work together. But if you have a distributed workforce, the challenge becomes, you're not seeing each other every day.

Jack Kelly:

You're not at the water cooler next week, after the Super Bowl, and we're all like, "Oh, wow. Did you see that play? Oh, do you see that?"

Jack Kelly:

You kind of lose out. So, you try to have the collaboration. You have to work at it. But I think, unless you really put in the time and the effort and also have the technology and the tools to get people together, it could be rough.

Jack Kelly:

I've seen studies with SHRM, the largest HR group, saying that managers — this is in surveys, actually — saying, "Hey, I don't like remote workers because I forget about them, and they're hard to manage." They're just being honest, because it is hard to manage, and especially when you didn't have to do that before.

Gene Marks:

Sure.

Jack Kelly:

So that what I see it with a lot of companies now, they're putting in new technologies, platforms, apps to try to keep ... But that is one of the biggest thing, to go back to your question about hybrid work. I think the companies that do it well would be the ones who could really get their arms around their employees, no matter where they work and where they live. The ones who don't, it's going to be tough, because then they're going to feel like second class citizens. They're going to feel left out.

Jack Kelly:

Think about it. I could tell you as a recruiter, if you're home all day and you feel overlooked and that no one cares about you, you're going to be sending resumes all day. You're going to be looking for a job. You're going to call up recruiters from the comfort of your home.

Jack Kelly:

It's no longer where, you're in the office and you get on the phone and you look around. Everyone knows you're on with a recruiter, and you have to sneak out. Like, "Ah, Jack's on with a recruiter."

Jack Kelly:

At home, it's not. So, this is going to be a big test, to see how they could function post-pandemic.

Gene Marks:

So Jack, finally, a lot of this stuff also has to do with just employee engagement and employee satisfaction.

Gene Marks:

You write a little bit about their accomplishments and celebrating workplace accomplishments.

Gene Marks:

I always joke. I mean, I think it's something like half the employees now, or close to half, are of the millennial generation. These are the age of my kids.

Gene Marks:

We raised them, where they got a trophy even if they were in last place, you know? So, I see that you mentioned workplace accomplishments and celebrating it. But this is something, this is a generational thing.

Gene Marks:

I think younger workers do want to be recognized for their accomplishments. They do like the celebrations around it and at least just to be noticed.

Gene Marks:

What are your thoughts on giving rewards and awards for accomplishments in the workplace and how to make a big deal about it?

Jack Kelly:

I'm a Gen X-er. So, it was hard to separate your own lived experience to what other people are looking for.

Jack Kelly:

When I started working, no one cared about me. They couldn't care less. No one said to me, "Jack, how's your mental health? How's your well-being?"

Gene Marks:

I know.

Jack Kelly:

No one cared.

Gene Marks:

Right.

Jack Kelly:

Didn't mean they were mean. It just wasn't a thing. Now, it's completely different. It's all about how you're doing. "How's your mental health? Hey, great job."

Jack Kelly:

For managers, you have to kind of know, you have different personalities. I'm not saying you have to coddle people, but you have to get ... A Gen X-er would probably be like, "Yeah, whatever. I don't care." A Baby Boomer may be a certain way.

Jack Kelly:

Millennials, Gen X is a completely different way. So for managers, moving forward, it's much tougher. It's very different. The generations are different, the way they have to work.

Jack Kelly:

Now, because it's a hot job market, they're in a box. Because if you don't take them seriously, even if they all want to get a trophy, they'll just leave. And then you'll lose the best and brightest. So, you have to find a way to kind of incorporate them.

Jack Kelly:

I'll give you example. So there's this company, Humanscale – I'm kind of spacing out on the exact name of it, Gene. But what they do is, they'll offer social recognition within the company.

Jack Kelly:

Let's say somebody does a good job. On social media internally, they'll say, "Hey, Gene did a great job. This is what he did." You give that kind of shout out, and then maybe a little monetary financial reward.

Jack Kelly:

So, there are kind of ways that you can kind of give that pat on the back. You can show that appreciation. And it goes a long way.

Gene Marks:

Yeah. I see a lot of my clients, they use team building apps. They use internal competitions, friendly competitions. They give gift cards out to their employees. They have little fringe benefits.

Gene Marks:

Literally, the parking space is not as popular now because everybody working from home, but days off, also. So, you're right. The rewards part are very important.

Gene Marks:

So again, psychological security, giving people rewards, having a hybrid workplace, being flexible, going out to a diverse workforce. Not necessarily race, color, gender, whatever, but just diverse, wherever they happen to be backgrounds, because that will bring all of that to your company.

Jack Kelly:

Exactly. Exactly.

Gene Marks:

Having good collaboration tools to talk with each other and rewarding your employees. These are all of the things, Jack, that go into running a successful ...

Gene Marks:

This is what you learned from Jesper Zerlang at LogPoint, and I guess what you're seeing with your clients. Right?

Jack Kelly:

Absolutely. Absolutely. And if I could add just one more thing that he and I talked about, too. The reality is, in this kind of environment — if it stays the way it is, and hopefully it does — where it's a good economy, things are, you know, it's not perfect, but it's good. Employment numbers are pretty high, so that it's really hard to attract and retain people.

Jack Kelly:

So for business owners, you have to really keep that in mind, because now they have options and they have choices. And it makes that job much tougher to do.

Jack Kelly:

So, you have to find ways to be empathetic. You have to find ways to show appreciation, to show gratitude, to find out what's important to them and then have it offer. Everyone's going to be different.

Jack Kelly:

So, the whole way things are going now, is so different than it was just three years ago. And it's hard for many managers and business owners to get their head around it, because it's like, you're used to doing something for 10, 20, 30 years, and now you have to do it all differently. Not easy.

Gene Marks:

Yeah, it's changed a lot. It's changed a lot. One of the many challenges that we have, running a business in 2022 and beyond.

Gene Marks:

Jack Kelly is the CEO of WeCruit. That's W-E-C-R-U-I-T-R.

Jack Kelly:

Yes.

Gene Marks:

No E on the ER. Right?

Jack Kelly:

Yep.

Gene Marks:

WeCruitr.com. Jack, thank you so much for joining us.

Jack Kelly:

Thank you. Excellent.

Gene Marks:

Yeah. Lots of fun and great advice that you have. And guys, if you want to check out Jack's column, it's was written on January 4th on forbes.com.

Gene Marks:

And Jack contributes lots of stuff to Forbes as well. So, you can catch him on there as well, at forbes.com.

Gene Marks:

My name is Gene Marks. Thank you so much for joining us for this episode of THRIVE.

Gene Marks:

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Announcer:

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