Mervyn Dinnen 0:06

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Mervyn Dinnen 1:06

On today's episode of the HR Means Business podcast, I'm going to be talking about current and future workforce trends, looking at some of the trends that have maybe got us to where we are today, and looking at what some of the future projections might be. I'm speaking today to Andrew Spence, who is a researcher, writer, speaker, consultant, who I've known for many years. He's known as the workforce futurist, and he writes pretty much every week on workforce trends, some really deep dive analysis. He's a great thinker, and it's a pleasure to be able to be able to speak to him today. Andrew or Andy, if you don't mind, would you like to introduce yourself?

Andrew Spence 1:46

Hi Mervyn, it's a great honor to speak to you today. And yes, so people might know me these days from writing a weekly newsletter Workforce Futurist, but my background has been working with HR functions, helping to reshape them to deliver workforce strategy. So, I've come across, maybe you know, hundreds of different versions of HR operating models. Helped to design them and implement them over a career, going back 20 or 30 years. But my motivation these days is to find out what's really driving work. How can we make work better? You know, that's probably my driver. And so that's why I put my thoughts out publicly. And under the speaking I do in consulting, is really, how can we make work better? You know, maybe for the next, the next 20-30, years. So that's a little bit about my motivation.

Mervyn Dinnen 2:40

Thank you. The next 20-30, years is a long time. Why do we delve back a bit? Should we start by delving back? I don't know, 10-15, years and how have you seen things develop? Because you and I were part of a nascent scene, scene or group of people who got together 15 years ago or so at un-conferences talking about work, technology, how things are evolving, what might happen next, and how have you seen that, I suppose, over the last 10-15, years, bringing us to where we are now?

Andrew Spence 3:12

Yeah, I think I see a lot of the same things happening. So, you know, if we look at, you know, the HR function, you know, there's a lot of interesting trends out there around technology, the move to the cloud, the move to mobile, even, you know, in those days, is only a few years into the move to the internet, you know. So as these new technology trends pop up, HR responds to them, you know. And you take sort of recruitment, which I know a lot of the listeners today are expert in and recruiters, but you know when the internet came out, it was kind of like, okay, we can take the paper application forms, turn them into online application forms. Then mobile came along, and we tried to put the application form into a mobile app, and the first versions of those were terrible, you know, we weren't taking into account the fact that mobile was a completely different interface to the internet. The first internet forms had 50 fields in and didn't work very well, you know. So I think when new technology comes up, it takes a while for us to work out how it's going to help us in our jobs, and it's the same these days with things like artificial intelligence as well. So I think these trends are coming up. I think it takes, you know, you get early adopters, you get larger companies thinking, Okay, we'll wait and see how it goes. But AI has been with us a long time. You know, I don't know if you know this, but, I was obsessed by AI as a teenager, going back to the last millennium. Alan Turing's question, "Can computers think," was something that really, really intrigued me. I did a master's in cognitive science, which include coding in AI, natural language processing and neural networks. And then I went for a job, you know, some of the consultancies, and they were like, you know, what the hell's AI? I've never heard of it. Get programming in COBOL kid, you know. So it's changed, but so I see some parallels with with that time Mervyn. I think that the question has to be is, how can we make this useful for our workforce needs, what our organization needs, and and that's still the challenge.

Mervyn Dinnen 5:26

And where do you think we are with AI adoption? I mean, there are obviously very, some very simple applications. I mean, most people use it, or a lot of people, judging from the last few days, where I've been at an expo, using it to write emails to, you know, those kind of straightforward things, for prompts and things. So, how have you seen that develop and effectively, what do you think might happen next?

Andrew Spence 5:53

No, so it's a great question. And going back to your first question about themes, one theme is that the marketing departments of work technology firms will hype up this new technology, stick a badge on the work tech solutions and say, now it's mobile, now it's SAS, now it's AI inside. But ultimately, they still need to deliver the same functions. So I think on the what's really brought AI to everyone's attention is the natural language interface; it feels like we're chatting to an old friend or a colleague and I use ChatGPT, for example, probably every day for personal stuff and for work stuff. It's a good editor, it's a good researcher. Maybe it's a six or seven out of 10 compared to a professional, but it's still pretty useful. But one thing that as an industry, we haven't got our heads around is artificial intelligence, in many ways, has the wrong name. You know, if you asked the 100 psychologists to define intelligence, they'd all come up with a different answer. So what we're doing is projecting lots of human values onto these interfaces, because they seem so friendly, and we've got the natural language element of them. But what we're talking about is data and algorithm statistics. It hasn't changed much, right? So I think it's been hyped an awful lot, and a lot of people are extrapolating too wildly about the impact on jobs. So I can get a little graphic design a birthday card or an image for my newsletter, within 30 seconds, I can get an image so I could extrapolate and say, "Well, why on earth would I need a graphic designer anymore?" But actually, graphic designers are still going to be needed to interpret, to bring out my requirements to create a vision, to understand how it fits into the business, to move up the value chain. So you know, the extrapolation from a task to there won't be any jobs to do anymore is over the top. Us humans will find ways to create value, to create new TikToks, YouTube videos, games, whatever is going to entertain us in the future. So I think there's a bit of hype, a bit of extrapolation, but let me not get away from the fact that it's a darn useful new technology, definitely.

Mervyn Dinnen 8:19

Do you think that you know how we're using it now, obviously, you know, if we have this conversation, in years time, we'll be using it differently. I'm guessing. I mean, can you see, or what would you predict to be the next iterations or the next, I suppose, changes in the way people use it?

Andrew Spence 8:36

Yeah, I think, you know, even in recruitment, you know, if I'm recruiting people into my team, yeah, I'm very interested in your background, skills, competencies, capabilities, but what tools do you use? You know, are you a master at DeepSeek, ChatGPT or Claude? Can you manage a team of agents who communicate with each other? Because then you're as effective as 10 people. You're bringing the whole team with you. And so I'm really interested in how productive people are going to be, what tools they're using, that might be something to look out for. And then I what I find really interesting, I always have done is how we design work. For me that should be one of HR, core purposes: designing work. In the past, that's been filling vacancies with permanent hires, right? But now we've got whole massive groups of people who will work as freelancers, contractors. We've got people who do tasks for us on projects. We've now got a whole load of automation options, including generative AI and other technology. That means designing work has suddenly become much broader. So I there's a good a good question for HR, does it jump into this role as work designer, or does it just fade away because there is going to be less need for permanent people? There's going to be smaller organizations, I suspect, over 10 and 20 years, as it's a very important junction point for the HR, I think.

Mervyn Dinnen 10:06

And as we're talking about different kind of, yeah, as you touched on there, I suppose the decentralized workforce, if you like people working under different arrangements, in different ways. Is, in terms of productivity, which I know whenever I go to sessions, particularly around AI, and this is how it's being used now, productivity always comes up as kind of one of the key it makes people more productive. It improves performance. What I'm hearing from you is maybe something a little bit more tempered, a little bit more nuanced, rather, about productivity, and it's not, it's not just we can do more quicker, or, you know, we can, you know, give you more. It's kind of, it's actually being smart. I suppose it's almost smart thinking, smart work. Is that where you see HR having a role in terms of designing it?

Andrew Spence 11:01

It absolutely has to move into that space. So when some work needs to be done to achieve the workforce goals, or some changes happen, that needs to be the number one focus is to think how to source that work, and to think more broadly than just okay, we can hire a VP of sales to do that. Now, actually, we need to think more broadly. Maybe we need a VP of sales plus, rather than 10 reports, we actually need somebody who can bring some automation tools to that and to look at to look at that. But we still need razor sharp focused on what the purpose is, and that's something that can be lost with all the change going on. So that's going to happen. And, yeah, to think more broadly. And then, you know, if we think of work Tech, I know you've been there at a work tech conference this week, Mervyn, if we think of work tech, is it equipped to help HR deal with this much more broad scope of managing work? You know, a lot of the tracking systems will deal with permanent employees. Many will pick up temporary people coming in and out, and then we've got a whole team of automation platforms and things as well that are going to be doing work it's rather hard to track. I've thrown a few difficult questions around diversity, inclusion, cohesion, and it's going to be very hard to measure. So the whole work, tech infrastructure, in my view, needs to move on and evolve, to help managers in this sense. So I see a future where a lot of the traditional HR work will be devolved a bit into these decentralized teams and organizations so that they they're able to bring people in, bring AI agents in to deliver the work goals. And the centralized role is compliance, making sure the technology is excellent, making sure the goals are delivered. So smaller group, but much more expert and probably more interesting. It depends on your on your own views on that.

Mervyn Dinnen 13:10

You've touched on, obviously a couple of times, the decentralized workforce, and that is something I know that you've done quite a bit on. I've seen you speak on. So I'm interested, because there are so many different and when I try and explain this to people who, you know, I know, who work, but they don't, you know, they're not HR people, they're not IT people, they're not people who have access to these daily conversations we have online and stuff about kind of the future of work, trying to explain that. You know, people who might be sitting in a basement somewhere 3000 miles away are inputting this, this hugely important piece of work is difficult for many to understand. So how have you I think you know, with your research on the decentralized workforce, how are you seeing all the different categories of worker and, I mean, are there some categories that we maybe haven't even kind of thought about yet that may begin to arise? I know you're saying about obviously, AI agents, but are there going to be people who are doing things which, you know, in five years time, we say, well, we didn't see that coming?

Andrew Spence 14:20

Yeah, I think it's been growing for a while. There's always been contractors and self employed people, right, in the economy. And to quantify, it's a little tricky, but, you know, there's some data that says about 16% of people in the US have earned money through an online gig platform. 16% around the sort of COVID era in the in the European Union, that's about 15% they think. But globally, it's more like 50%. Most people in the global workforce, which is about 3.4 billion, I think it's about half of the people, are self-employed. They're working formally. There's no contracts. You gotta take a global perspective on this. So quite a few people, anyway, have been self employed. But what we saw during COVID is, you know, people who weren't getting income through their job or because they had different lifestyle challenges with earning income, started to work on these online platforms. And you know, that varied from doing graphic design work on Upwork or Fiverr, or maybe creating a little business on Etsy or Shopify with masks, you know, in COVID with different patterns and things like that, and people could do that at home and dispatch them. So, you know, you didn't need a boss, you could earn some income. So there's lots of examples of people earning income in non-traditional ways. Even at a more executive level, there's platforms like Top-Down, where people can offer consulting services, there's a big rise in fractional executives who are working for two days a week for three or four months as a CMO, CHRO, CFO. So there's lots of people who want to work in a more diverse way, which is very interesting. I wrote a piece about the rise of Africa. You know, by 2030, most people entering this global workforce will be from Africa, it'll be the largest continent, and we've got all these digital platforms. There's a lot of work that can be can be sourced from around the world now. So it is pretty big. I think a lot of people tried to set up their side hustle in the COVID era. And some were very successful. They set up businesses. Others faded away, but they probably had some fun doing it. One thing I would say about that, if you're hiring 20 somethings into job roles compared to the generation before and the generation before that, the motivation to work is slightly different. So these days, you get 24/7 free quality streaming entertainment, whether that's music, movies, cat videos, whatever your thing is, you can be entertained for free, pretty much, going back a generation, you needed a job to earn money to go to cinema, you know. So if you think of it like that. So then it becomes, you know, employers big competitor. It isn't just their competitor in the industry, it's the fact that people want to do a job at all.

Mervyn Dinnen 17:42

Okay, and bringing it around, I suppose to HR, one of the things that kind of springs to mind is with all these different workers working under different arrangements, personal arrangements. HR, presumably still has a responsibility to keep tabs on all of this. But you know, if a manager in an office somewhere brings somebody in off of a gig platform to do something, that person, technically is, is doing work for your organization, but you have no knowledge of it.

Andrew Spence 18:13

I think it'll be a nightmare. I saw a map of all the different applications and technology you can use in HR these days, it's got hundreds and hundreds of different vendors. I also read a statistic that says the average employee touches 20 different applications in their work week, from logging on using from performance systems to knowledge sharing and the rest of it. So it must be very hard to track all of these things. So as I mentioned before, the work technology needs to evolve to make sure that work is compliant. And I can think of nightmare scenarios in industries such as health, tourism and the rest of it, where you get casual workers coming in. It absolutely needs to be tracked. So you know, there's a big industry around that, with third parties who are who are liable, ultimately, but as I mentioned, HR, need to make sure the job gets done, that they're compliant, and they know what's going on. And it is a real, a real challenge at the moment, as that changes, yeah.

Mervyn Dinnen 19:21

One of the things I know you've done quite a bit of research on, and I suppose leads on from this a little bit, is the concept, I suppose, of loneliness the workforce. You know, when I started work, we all sat in the same place, you know, we we all got up and went to lunch at the same time. We all came back at the same time. And, yes, you had structured lunch breaks in those days, listeners, and nobody expected you to be in the office a minute after 5:30. Now, you've got people working under different arrangements. They could be, you know, in another country and on another continent when working from home. I don't, I don't want to go too much into the remote-flexible-hybrid working debate, because there's obviously a number of conversations online about that, and I've had a couple of podcasts myself. But just in general, the kind of people working on their own, maybe in their own spaces, you've got loneliness, and general, the impact on creativity, the impact on actually finishing the work properly and carefully, diligently. How do you see this? This, to me, could be a nightmare for HR, because it's firstly, they've got to support people who might be feeling this, and it might be quite difficult for people to own up and say, actually, you know, I know I've chosen to work from home, but you know, I do miss interaction. I know that there's some research around which hasn't been published but gets spoken about, about looking at people's how they feel and certainly how productive they are, depending on kind of, you know, if they have time in a space to get there, as opposed to time connecting online through zoom things. And some of it would, would kind of lend itself to say, actually, you need to get more people back into a space together. So how do you see, I suppose. Firstly, what's your research showing you at the moment about the direction of travel? And secondly, how do you see this playing out over the next three to five years?

Andrew Spence 21:22

It's a very interesting subject, and I started researching it because I saw some data that said, for example, the share of 30-year-olds who live on their own, you know, has massively increased over the generations, over 40-50, years. Live with a kid own a home, these kind of stats are going in one direction, you know. So people are spending more time alone. To one extent, that's kind of shocking. And, you know, that's been documented over, over many years, you know, Robert Putnam wrote, wrote the book about Bowling Alone, you know. And it's kind of people going out bowling alone. It is very sad. And so on the face of it, that the data from sociologists are showing that people are spending more time alone. And you know, maybe this is the anti-social century, and there's some data in the UK. You'd think it'd be maybe the over 80s who reported the most loneliness, but in the UK, it was the under 30s who reported most loneliness. That's kind of surprising and sad. And only 6% of young adults say that they meet friends, relatives or colleagues less than once a month. So about 6% which is, which is, which is sad as well. So you could easily say, from this, oh my god, there's a loneliness epidemic, you know, and it's bad for health, it's bad for the workforce and productivity, etc. But actually, you know this research that says being alone doesn't necessarily mean you're lonely, like I mentioned, the streaming entertainment, there's WhatsApp, and there's all those ways to interact in gaming, so people are social, but in a in the in a digital form, okay, so that's certainly changed over the many years. And I think loneliness in work is a thing, you know. I think that there is some research that shows that lonely employees have lower job satisfaction, reduced productivity. There's higher turnover. So one opportunity potentially for employers, you know. So you've got the com the competition of the side hustles, the gig economy, the decentralized workforce. What opportunities for the employers to say, you know, come and work for us. So there's a social element of it. There's opportunities to meet like-minded people, whatever ages or whatever that is, and that that's a competitive advantage. Very good for your employer brand, if you offer activities that can reduce loneliness and the rest of it. So, you know, I think it's an opportunity for employees. How that looks will depend on the particular demographics, location, the type of work. I'm not going to say that, you know, it means, you know, people play volleyball in the park on Saturdays or whatever, but, you know, each employer would be able to work that out, but it could be a nice differentiator, a nice one for employer brand.

Mervyn Dinnen 24:34

Andy, It's been a fascinating conversation. We're coming towards the end, so I suppose one thing I've got to throw at you is, what do you see coming next? If we sit down in a year's time, what do you think we'll be talking about?

Andrew Spence 24:50

I think organizations are getting smaller. There'll be a massive influx of people out of corporates into the decentralized workforce. We're going to be talking about how to manage long careers and lifestyles in this context, building our own brands, building our own businesses, making a living. I think that's going to be massive over the next 10-20 years.

Mervyn Dinnen 25:18

I know! I was reading an article in the Financial Times, if I could name check that a couple of months ago, about people in their 80s who hadn't retired and had no intention of retiring. So yes, I mean, we do have to cater it within the workforce for obviously a much more increased longevity of workers. But as you say, that's not necessarily employees sitting in front of us, that's people inputting in different ways to the outputs that the organization has

Andrew Spence 25:48

Absolutely, there's much more flexibility, I would say definitely.

Mervyn Dinnen 25:52

Andy, it's been fascinating. How can people get ahold of you, or get in touch with you?

Andrew Spence 25:57

You know, I put I actually publish stuff, so that people do get back to me. Agree with me, disagree with me. Give me better examples. Give me ideas. I would say, you know, look at my newsletter, Workforce Futurist on Substack. I'm on LinkedIn. Bluesky, I've started using as well. So I always appreciate people contacting me. And I just like to say, finally, it's been a great honor and pleasure to speak to you, Mervyn. Thank you very much for having me on.

Mervyn Dinnen 26:25

It's been a pleasure. Thank you, Andy.

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