

Josh Bersin: HR Earned a Seat at the Table. Now What?



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Full transcript

Rob Parsons:

Welcome to the Paychex HR Leadership Series. I'm your host, Rob Parsons. I lead the content team here at Paychex, and we write extensively on a variety of HR topics, covering everything from HCM technology, to team engagement, to compliance with state and federal regulations. Joining me today is Josh Bersin. Josh is a global research analyst, public speaker, and writer on the topics of corporate human resources, talent management, recruiting, leadership, technology, and the intersection between work and life. He also advises a variety of HR and learning companies to help them align their products and services towards the needs of their corporate buyers. Josh, welcome to the podcast.

Josh Bersin:

Thank you, Rob. It's nice to be here and talk about what's going on in this crazy world.

Rob Parsons:

Yeah, we've started, in our family, we've just started calling it COVID times.

Josh Bersin:

It's definitely a unique time, that's for sure. Haven't ever been through this before.

Rob Parsons:

And it's interesting, when we last spoke, you were prepping for the Bersin Academy's live event, the Big Reset Town Hall. How did that go?

Josh Bersin:

Well, really, really spectacularly well. There's so much going on at work, in the workplace, in organizations. And HR has played such a huge role in the pandemic, and stepped up and really been given incredible amounts of responsibility. We had seven large companies go through their pandemic response strategies and what they've done for their people and their workplaces and their policies. And we're doing it again. We're actually doing a whole other sprint on the same thing. And then we're adding a whole big focus on

racial injustice and diversity and inclusion and fairness, which is another big topic that's come out of this. So it's an inspiring time to be in HR, a little bit tiring, but I think most of us are dealing with it.

Rob Parsons:

Yes, no question. We actually have a meeting scheduled for 9:00 in the morning on Saturday because we know the Congress and the government will drop some new regulations on us that we have to be ready to respond to.

Josh Bersin:

And then you guys have to suddenly turn everything on.

Rob Parsons:

Yeah, that's exactly it.

Josh Bersin:

Yeah.

Rob Parsons:

I like what you talked about, the increased responsibility of HR professionals. We just released our Pulse of HR Survey for 2020. And a big theme came out. Instead of, HR wants a seat at the table, it appears that HR now has a seat on the table, whether they want it or not.

Josh Bersin:

No. Yeah, this question of whether HR has a seat at the table is basically answered. Yes, absolutely. In fact, HR is now at the table with IT, finance, operations, safety, facilities, and bolted together with all of these back office or functional areas to try to figure out how to transform the company. And I think we're in a stage now where it isn't just taking care of people and health and safety and hygiene. It's really transforming the company, whatever industry you're in, or business you're in, to adapt to different customer needs, and of course the needs of the employees and responding to that. And it's something that most companies probably didn't expect to be doing this year, but it's happening very quickly, and HR's really involved. So we don't have to debate whether it has a seat at the table anymore.

Rob Parsons:

No, sir. And I know our own HR teams, they've been calling it forced evolution. They knew this was coming, it just came a little bit more quickly than they anticipated.

Josh Bersin:

Well, and the word evolution is good because it's not ... Many of the things that are coming up are new. I mean, I don't think most HR people studied public health or epidemiology or things like that. And we're actually starting to build some programs like that in our academy. But 80% of what we're dealing with is topics that we already knew a lot about. But we were maybe slow rolling them and working on them piece by piece. And now we have to work on them immediately. So well-being, mental and physical resilience, dealing with work at home, family, work life, kids not going to school and being in the house, not knowing where to go, when in the office, or in the store, or in the location, and the policies changing all the time. These are kind of like problems in HR that we were kind of dealing with slowly that now we're dealing with overnight.

Josh Bersin:

And I think what's been positive about it is most HR professionals I talk to have found that they now have the freedom to make decisions quickly and iteratively as opposed to, well, let's check this, and let's wait, and let's talk about it some more. And maybe we'll do it next year. Uh-un, we're doing it next week, and then we're going to monitor it. And we're going to fix it the next day if there's anything wrong, which is a healthy change.

Rob Parsons:

It certainly is. I do love the idea of moving quickly and course correcting and being agile and being responsive. In fact, that's something that we've been hearing throughout, that not just the HR teams, but leadership throughout the entire organization needs to have that same kind of mindset.

Josh Bersin:

Yeah. And it gets to the issue of one of the things, which you guys do, is having good technology is now an essential or really mandatory part of this. I don't think too many CEOs or general managers are going to be happy when the HR person says, "Well, I really can't do that because I'm too busy, or it's going to take me too long." There's no excuse for that, so the platforms like Paychex that you guys have built over the years are becoming enabling tools for all of these changes that are going on in companies from safety, to leadership, to pay, to rewards. And we don't have to debate whether you need it anymore. We're just using them.

Rob Parsons:

Yeah. It's an excellent point. And we've been seeing it across many of the technologies we've been using. There's a lot of functionality that we didn't take advantage of. There was a lot of capability in these tools. And we're even seeing it with our own client base getting better use out of the platform because they have to.

Josh Bersin:

Well, and the design point of HR technology for many years was transactional. So there's a form, you fill it in, and then it goes into some database, and then everybody can run reports. That's a piece of it, but that's probably 15% or 20% at the most. Now, it's we need a workflow that models the way we do something, training, onboarding, recruiting, whatever it is, performance management. And we need to be able to modify it and tweak it based on what's going on in the company now versus what we maybe thought we needed when we bought it. So the HR platforms, like what you guys do, are much more flexible than they ever were in the past, so we're able to use them for new things.

Josh Bersin:

I talked to a company in the early days of the pandemic who said -- I don't remember what platform they were using, but -- "We went home over the weekend, and we found that our onboarding system was a pretty good system for employee communications on new policies for the pandemic, so we just stuck all our content in there and told people to go into the onboarding system to find all this, and it worked out fine," so that's an example of how it's changed.

Rob Parsons:

I like that. You definitely cut your teeth and made your name in that HR technology space. Have you seen other technologies really coming into the ... As an HR leader, are there other technologies that need to come into my portfolio, into my worldview now, to help me do my job more effectively?

Josh Bersin:

Yeah. I think there's maybe three big changes in tech that everybody needs to be aware of. One is the collaboration tools like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Slack, Workplace by Facebook, Yammer, whatever you may use, are now vital communication and learning tools. They're not just messaging. Whenever you want to get out a new policy, or a new process, or you want to inform people about something, you have all these communication tools to use, so pick one, standardize on it, and make sure people know where to go, as opposed to companies who tended to build, "Well, the engineers are using this, and the sales people are using Salesforce, and somebody else is using this." And all of a sudden, we've got all these little things going on. And then when you try to roll something out to the whole company, you create another system for that. So that's a big change. That's why tools like Microsoft Teams have been taking off so quickly.

Josh Bersin:

The second is there's a vast amount of learning going on that looks like information, but it's also learning. So one of the things that came out of your survey was how much people want to be informed. They want to know what offices are open. And "What's the policy for this? What's happening in this city? What's happening in this state, this country?" But then they want to know more about that. Not only the email on what happened, but what do I need to do about it? Or what is the implication to me? Or what do I need to know in my job relevant to that? So videos, stories, podcasts, those are sort of learning things that are also becoming very, very important parts of the pandemic response.

Josh Bersin:

And then the third is what we have started to call employee experience platforms that used to be more like case management tools, where my computer's broken, I need a new laptop, or I need my password reset. I go into a website, I type a little query, it goes to some IT person, and they come back. Those are turning into workflow management systems that can not only take that case, but say, "Oh, as a result of filling out that case, I'm going to send you to this person, who's already solved that case and they're going to give you an answer." Those are all happening, and they were all product areas that were evolving already before the pandemic that are making it easier and easier and easier to manage all these changes.

Josh Bersin:

And then the fourth thing I would just mention is data. Not only who's on the payroll and how much money I'm making, but who's home, who's on vacation, who's traveling, who might have elderly parents in their home relative to the new office that's opening up...I talked to a company the other day in the UK that has a bunch of restaurants around the UK. And they wanted to staff employees so they wouldn't have to take public transportation to get to work because people didn't trust public transportation right now. So they created a little application using Google Maps. They could find the store that was close enough, closest to any employee. Any employee could use this little application, and then see if there was a staffing opportunity for them to work in that store, given their role and the skills they have. And then it would schedule them automatically. So they wouldn't have to get on a bus, go across town, and potentially get infected, to go get to their traditional location.

Josh Bersin:

That was an application. They told me somebody kind of hacked that up in two or three days using, sort of, a communication platform that they already had. Those are things that I think every company has opportunities like that; using the data that's available inside the company for this new world of pandemic response and customer transformation.

Rob Parsons:

I really love that last story too because it really lets you know that innovation isn't just a new piece of technology. It's how you're bringing it to bear on the problems, it's solving problems in new ways. It's really opening up your minds to the possibilities.

Josh Bersin:

And that gets to the issue of the HR role a little bit. And I know a lot of your clients are smaller companies, but I think one of the things that's been happening for years, and it's also being accelerated by the pandemic, is that HR professionals are problem solvers. They're not administrators. Some of them may have drifted into HR because of their administrative jobs and their administrative roles. But what we're seeing in almost every company now is, yes, we need to do these transactions, and pay people, and get the bonuses taken care of, and the benefits administered, and so forth. And, "we have a special case over here." And, "why don't you think about how we're going to pay people for working at home?" And, "what are we going to do about hours when people can't come to work during the day because their kids are home?"

Josh Bersin:

I mean, these are consultative questions that are being asked of HR teams. And whether you feel that you were capable of that in the past or not, this is your job. And most HR people have tremendous amounts of insight into the people side of the company that they can do this. So I think most HR professionals -- their roles are raising, and their level of responsibility is going up. And they're having the opportunity to really take advantage of all the skills they have in very, very different ways.

Rob Parsons:

I think that's great. And to jump off of that, a layer I'm seeing is this idea of employee engagement. I know on joshbersin.com, you've got articles on how engagement's been rising. In the Pulse of HR Survey, we see engagement is rising. So HR professionals are doing something right.

Josh Bersin:

Well, there's kind of a funny, it's like a hyper-engagement problem. People are very engaged. Well, first of all, it started with the businesses in general. Most CEOs and general managers have become very empathetic. I call CEO the chief empathy officers now because they really realize that if we can't make the workplace comfortable for customers, and that ... If you're a restaurant, or whatever business you're in, they're not going to come. Ditto for employees. So the executives are basically now realizing that's their number one goal. That's laying onto the HR team, help me figure out how to do this. And the employees are saying, "Wow, the company's bending over backwards for me, letting me work at home, maybe gave me a little bit of a bonus. They're giving me some new benefits. And I'm not commuting, so I have more time. So now I'm working 10 hours a day instead of eight hours a day, and I'm kind of tired. So I kind of like my job, and I like my company, and I like my work. But I'm a little bit fried at the same time."

Josh Bersin:

So there was just a study that came out yesterday. Some PhDs did a bunch of analysis of emails and stuff. And they found that the average office-type worker is working 48 minutes longer every day than they did before the pandemic. I think most of us would say it's more like an hour and a half to two hours is what it feels like. So it's high engagement and high degrees of fatigue. So we've got to give people pace and a little bit of rhythm to this because we can't work ... Look, a lot of people haven't even had vacation yet this year because they didn't have anyplace to go. So it's going to be the fall before you know it, so I think the month of August is a little bit of a pause for a lot of companies, where people are going to take a little bit of a rest.

Rob Parsons:

And I think that makes a lot of sense. I want to touch back on something you've mentioned about smaller companies because smaller companies don't have some of those luxuries that larger companies have to invest in technologies, to make these things happen, to extend things out to teams. What advice would you give for that, let's call it the HR department of one, who's trying to juggle these very real needs they're facing?

Josh Bersin:

Well, I mean, I have the small company. The company that I lead is not a big. I think it comes down to realizing that every ... Especially in a small company, and this is true in a big company too, every individual has their own personal needs, challenges, stresses, fears, concerns about the pandemic. And if you listen to them, and be patient with them, and spend a little bit of time accommodating them, it will pay off. Nobody comes to work and wants to do a bad job. Nobody wants the company to fail. Nobody wants to hurt the customers. Nobody wants to provide poor service. But when we have all these other distractions in our lives and concerns, we would like the company to understand that.

Josh Bersin:

So if you're a small company, you can do that on a one on one basis. You can talk to people regularly. You can listen to them. You can make small accommodations for the personal issues they might have. And that doesn't require buying a bunch of software and doing all sorts of fancy things. So I think a lot of it's just listening. And as an executive and as a leader, spending a little more time listening and less time talking will make people feel a little bit better, especially if you have young people in your company. Young people, a lot of young people, they have roommates. They don't get to go to the office and hang around with their friends at work. Maybe they're not married. They can't date right now. I mean, everybody's got issues caused by the pandemic. And I think what we want employers to do is just listen and make people know that we do care about them. We can't fix all these problems, but the fact that the organization cares and is trying is enough. People understand that, so that's something any company can do.

Rob Parsons:

And I really like ... I want to talk about the Bersin Academy a little bit here.

Josh Bersin:

Sure.

Rob Parsons:

Because a lot of HR leaders do feel a bit on an island, they have to be there for everyone. But who's there for them? So I want you to touch on the Bersin Academy because in addition to all the resources you have, there's some networking and some collaboration there where they might be able to find some like minded individuals who can help out with some challenges. So why don't you touch on that a little bit?

Josh Bersin:

Sure. I started the academy about a year and a half or two years ago, and it's been explosively growing. And the problem we're trying to solve, it's an interesting problem. It reminds me of the military. I used to work for a guy, it was an admiral in the Navy. And he said, "Basically, we only do two things in the military. We fight and we train. And when we're not fighting, we're training." So to some degree, we have the same thing in HR. When you're not solving a problem, you should be educating yourself on what's going on. I mean, we are in a vastly expanding world of issues in HR. Pay, benefits, rewards, is the simplest. We've got safety, mental resilience, leadership, education, workplace policies, safety, hygiene, on and on and on and on.

Josh Bersin:

And most HR people entered HR for one of two reasons. One is they just liked being with people and they wanted to be in a part of the business that was very people-centric. Or they had a particular skill in some area, they were a trainer, or a recruiter, or a payroll person, and they just went into the HR profession. Well, you can't do that anymore. You have to broaden yourself and understand these new topics. And so what we do in the academy is we have quite a few, we have 60 or 70 hours of formal training now and a whole bunch of informal stuff, where you can go in there and learn about dozens and dozens of topics in different areas of HR -- everything from learning and agile performance management, to resilience, to well-being -- and collaborate with other HR people in the process. And so the learning experience is designed to be collaborative because no one template fits every company.

Josh Bersin:

So while you're learning about the domain and the best practices, you're also collaborating with other people and seeing what they're doing. So we find in our academy, there's about 12 ... We get about 1,000 new members a month now, so there's a lot of people joining it. And the average academy member meets six of their peers during their first six months in the academy through the connections. So part of this is getting to know what other companies are doing because we're all inventing things as fast as we can, so that's really what the academy is designed to do.

Josh Bersin:

And I know HR people are busy. Nobody wants to sit around and take courses all day. This is designed to be a place where you can go, spend 10 minutes, learn as much as you can, go back to work, come back later. I mean, it's designed to be both a micro learning and a macro learning experience. And I encourage people to go, and thank you for letting me bring it up, Rob.

Rob Parsons:

My pleasure. I think it's great. I think the timing couldn't have been better. I mean, think about what we're missing out on with SHRM not happening this year, with HR Tech not happening this year.

Josh Bersin:

That's true. Yeah.

Rob Parsons:

Where we would interact with our peers, we would go to the sessions. We would see speakers like you. We would get information. We'd have a chance to expand our minds instead of just in the day to day.

Josh Bersin:

Well, the other thing I would add is we do a lot of live events online, like what you and I are doing right now. And people tend to find time for that. Not everybody can go to everything, but one hour a week, one hour every two weeks to go to an event with a bunch of other HR people and talk to them and learn, it makes you feel better. You feel more connected. You have much more sense of connectivity to the rest of the profession, so that's kind of what we're living with right now.

Rob Parsons:

Yes, for sure. Well, we're starting to run up against it here. As we wrap up, are there any parting thoughts or anything you'd want to leave the audience with as we look to these next six to eight months? I know you don't have a crystal ball. But what should I be thinking about? What's next?

Josh Bersin:

Well, I'll give you guys one thing to think about. I've been doing some work with Marty Seligman, who's the father of positive psychology, and he taught me some things I want to share. We're in a time of uncertainty. It's not going to be easy for you to tell people we know what's going to happen in three months or six months. We really don't. Nobody really does. So what we need to do is give people a sense of positive outlook in the future. And as he describes it, it's basically three things: number one is optimism, so give people a plan that's credible and reasonable, that they feel they can follow, so they know that the company has some vision of what's going to happen over the next year that's positive. And that doesn't have to be overly optimistic, but just realistic.

Josh Bersin:

The second is: give people time for joy. Turn off the TV. Turn off Twitter. Turn off the news. Have a little fun. Tell some jokes. Play some music. Let people enjoy their life. We do have a little bit of a different life right now. The environment's a little bit better. It's not as much traffic. There are some good things about all this. And the third is to prevent trauma. What his research shows, is what does cause PTSD and military problems and so forth, is when really bad things happen. So one of our jobs in HR is to watch out for the problems that can turn into big problems. And so that's listening and empathizing and being more flexible than ever.

Josh Bersin:

And I think if you do those things and maintain a sense of positive psychology for the next year, we'll come through this. The pandemic may get worse before it gets better. It sort of feels like that's where we are. But those things have been learned through years of positive psychology, studying what happens in war, what happens in the military. And we're in a little bit of that situation right now, and hopefully that helps you guys think a little bit about it from an HR perspective.

Rob Parsons:

That's great. Thank you, Josh. And thanks for joining me today.

Josh Bersin:

Thank you, Rob.

Rob Parsons:

To get more of Josh's thoughtful insights, visit joshbersin.com. There's some really nice articles, some really good reads there. You should also check out bersinacademy.com. As Josh mentioned, it's a site full of tools, resources, and a really nice community to help HR professionals prepare for today's very unique challenges. Thank you for listening to this episode of the Paychex HR Leadership Series. You can listen to all of our episodes on the most popular podcast platforms, as well as on paychex.com at paychex.com/works/podcasts. We also have the Paychex Business Series hosted by Gene Marks, where he talks with business owners and compliance and legal experts about the challenges facing businesses today. And you heard us mention the Pulse of HR Survey; You can get your own copy of the report at payx.me/pulse2020.