

Season 2 | Episode 7

# The Future of Work with Alison Stevens



**Rob Parsons**

Manager, Content and Brand  
Paychex, Inc.



**Alison Stevens**

Director of HR Services,  
Paychex Inc.

## 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.

**Rob Parsons:**

In this podcast, we speak with leaders and thinkers in the industry, to provide our audience with the latest HR insights and information, and hopefully more than a little inspiration. Joining me today is Alison Stevens, the director of HR services here at Paychex. Alison's team is comprised of nearly 600 HR professionals who are responsible for providing HR outsourcing services, including professional employer organization, Or PEO services, to our clients across the U.S. Her career in HR and leadership spans 25 years in the professional services and HCM outsourcing industries. Alison, welcome to the podcast.

**Alison Stevens:**

Hi, Rob. Thanks so much for having me. It's awesome to be here.

**Rob Parsons:**

It's great, and I'm looking forward to this conversation. We meet regularly with members of your team just to hear issues that are top of mind. It really helps us in our efforts to provide good content that is helpful for the audience.

**Alison Stevens:**

Yes.

**Rob Parsons:**

This year, of course, COVID-19. That's been the consistent topic, but we have seen the specifics evolve and change from when everything first started hitting, to as we were adapting and changing. What would you say you're seeing right now? Where are we at in this evolution of this new environment?

**Alison Stevens:**

That's a fantastic question, Rob, because things have continued to evolve and change, sometimes day to day, definitely week to week. And, I think, I would say right now, that COVID-19 remains a pretext for the myriad HR issues that we see businesses facing. What we see right now, I would say, are three major topics, kind of over that HR umbrella, again, with that pretext of COVID-19.

**Alison Stevens:**

Leave management being a top issue, employee relations, and then workforce planning. So things like remote work arrangements, furloughs, layoffs, et cetera. So with leave management, we're providing guidance to our clients right now on protected leave. Lots of questions about the Families First Act, FFCRA. Educating our clients on what laws apply, right? There might be state laws and certainly there may be federal laws. So making sure our clients are fully educated on all those considerations they need to have when making good decisions for their business. And then also providing consideration as to whether ADA or FMLA will apply in the particular issue that they might be facing.

**Rob Parsons:**

Yeah, I know we've seen a lot of action on the state level, particularly in New York and California regarding leave.

**Alison Stevens:**

Yes, lots happening at the local level, so really important to keep our clients up to date on everything that's happening that might be affecting their business, particularly if they operate in those states. But really, as you know, we're seeing our clients asking tons of questions, from all states. It's really top of mind right now.

**Alison Stevens:**

The second is on the employer relations front. So we see our clients really looking for that strategic partner to help them navigate complex employee relations issues that they may not have faced before. Not that it's not familiar to them, but HR leaders really just have to look right now through, potentially, a different lens. And we might be helping the most seasoned HR professional, but really making sure they're getting down to all the details of the factors they might need to consider.

**Alison Stevens:**

And again, leaning in, looking at those situations from multiple lenses. And we're really focused right now, as you know, Rob, on helping our clients and preventing them from making a poor decision or a costly decision. More important than ever to prevent that. So, my team is really busy right now conducting that risk analysis and assessment of that situation, so we can provide them with the best guidance on how to handle the most complex employee relations issues.

**Rob Parsons:**

What are some of those specific issues that you've been seeing? Things that are maybe not new challenges, but more prevalent or just more under the spotlight than before?

**Alison Stevens:**

I think something that we've seen that I was actually just talking to my team about yesterday, that's the most prevalent, is we are seeing a rise in questions from our clients, concerns from our clients on employee claims, as they bring employees back to work.

**Alison Stevens:**

And many businesses are faced with situations where they cannot bring everybody back, right? So they're bringing employees back at a limited basis and then there are employees who are asking, "Well, why did you select this person over me?" And that is driving a lot of activity and questions from their employee base that they have to navigate. So I would say that's a very prevalent issue that we're facing right now.

**Rob Parsons:**

Yeah, once again, the importance of objective criteria, documentation, and really being very thoughtful about how you handle these situations.

**Alison Stevens:**

Exactly. I think the headline for all of the things I've described as it relates to those top HR topics is communication. Really effective communication, documentation and as you've said, looking at things objectively, making sure you have all the facts.

**Rob Parsons:**

And then that last point you brought up, we were talking about workforce planning, workforce management, a year ago, because it was really hard to find talent. There was a real crunch. Now it's a different ball game. We're still dealing with workforce planning challenges, but they're completely different now.

**Alison Stevens:**

They are. And now we've gone a full 360 degrees to workforce planning being more focused on employees, preparing employees to return to work, as we just covered, remote work arrangements, right? So working with your employees who, if you can't bring your employees back to the workplace, what are those remote work arrangements that you might be arranging for your employees?

**Alison Stevens:**

And then also, your employees might be asking for a remote work arrangement or a flexible work arrangement, right? So that whole idea of scheduling and planning, particularly based on the type of industry you might be in, that's really important and requires a lot of precision and planning and communication as I already alluded to.

**Rob Parsons:**

For certain. Man, I know even just members of our own team have school-aged children and we've had to just be flexible around those schedules, because it's a new reality.

**Alison Stevens:**

Yes, it is. And I think we're back to school, right? We're only six weeks in, to back to school, but there are so many variations into what does back to school mean? Many employees have children who are fully remote, so that impacts their remote work arrangement for the entire family sometimes. Everybody balancing sort of who's doing what and when, inside your home.

**Alison Stevens:**

The second is, those employees whose children are going back in a hybrid arrangement, but perhaps it's not a full day. I know some of my own employees, their children are in school just a few hours. So, they have to sort of stop what they're doing, they have to get their children to and from school. And I've even heard, going to school, my son is fully remote, so I actually feel somewhat lucky that I don't have to navigate the long lines of dropping your child off at school, right? Which is a factor now, particularly as you're starting your day.

**Alison Stevens:**

So there's just so much that has gone into return to work, return to school. You can really see how those are colliding right now and impacting how companies make decisions when it comes to HR.

**Rob Parsons:**

For certain. And when we spoke a few weeks back, you talked even about, that we're at a very interesting tipping point here, that there's some decisions being made about staying distributed, or even thinking about long term changing, how we handle work and handle these remote distributed work arrangements.

**Alison Stevens:**

Right, we did talk about that and it's interesting. I was going back and taking a look at the pulse of HR survey that we did at Paychex just a few months ago. And there, we found among small businesses, 55% of the companies we surveyed, plan to allow or require employees to work remotely. And then at the same time, we saw just over 40% of those same respondents, you'll see more flexible work schedules becoming a permanent change to their work environment.

**Alison Stevens:**

So, it's a really, really big topic right now. I was -- I was talking to employees who have children in school and sort of what that means... But then there's also, I've talked to some employees this past week, who's elder children are in college and actually contracted COVID while at college. And that brings a whole new level of stress to the parent, right? So while that's not necessarily affecting your remote work arrangement, it's sort of affecting your outlook on how you might approach your thinking and your own personal situation as it relates to returning to the workplace or staying in that remote work arrangement.

**Rob Parsons:**

That separation of professional and personal lives got really blurry.

**Alison Stevens:**

It did. It did. And I think businesses are faced with really important decisions right now, but that may not be clear right this minute, right? They have to consider the safety of their employees. And if they're considering a return to work, they have to have a solid plan. Making sure their safety protocols are tight. And again, I will sound like a broken record, I'm going to put that disclaimer up, that communication is key. If they're not communicating regularly and often with their employees around what those plans are, I think that also lends itself to potential challenges on how you manage and affect the employee engagement of your employees.

**Alison Stevens:**

To make sure that they know what's happening, what to expect. So, as you said, they're thinking about the personal, they're thinking about the professional and they themselves can make good decisions on where they're going to go next, as it relates to making a decision of returning to the workplace or making a request, because they do require a flexible work arrangement based on what their personal situation might be right now. It's very confusing

**Rob Parsons:**

For certain. And I imagine there's a whole technology layer that comes into play. I mean, six months ago, you and I would have been in the studio recording this face to face. And today we're on a Zoom meeting and that's kind of the norm.

**Rob Parsons:**

Are there some HR-related technologies, or have you seen some things in the technology space, that can help some of these decisions, or at least, what our listeners need to be thinking about and considering as they're planning the future of work and how they want to manage these different situations?

**Alison Stevens:**

Yeah, that's a great question, Rob. And I see two areas of focus as we talk about HR technology and how it supports that increasing shift towards remote work, is one example. So, the first is self-service. At Paychex, we're making sure that our clients are prepared for the trend with our mobile-first Paychex Flex platform. We allow for managers, employees, to make over 25 self-service transactions inside the flex platform, through their mobile devices.

**Alison Stevens:**

So they can customize screens, they can allow online access for different types of users. They can administer self peer manager, self-service options, all those different variations based on what works for their business. They can create those workflows. So again, they're kind of taking, HR professionals can now take those task -related -- kind of heavy task related actions -- they can now be automated leveraging technology so that HR professionals and leaders can focus on the more important tasks at hand, which is of course, as we talked about, focusing on your employees' wellbeing and communicating with them often.

**Alison Stevens:**

And then the second is maintaining a consistent culture of that feedback and connection. So again, we have a feature in Paychex Flex called HR Conversations, that enables digital employee dialogue. So

allowing managers to track employee interactions, maybe using it as a way to check in and pulse and see how they're feeling. So, so much opportunity right now, as it relates to leveraging technology, again, to really ensure that our leaders, our HR leaders, are able to focus on what's important right now, and sit more in that strategic place in helping to lead their business versus managing multiple tasks right now.

**Rob Parsons:**

That's got to make a huge difference, automating as much as you can, pushing capabilities down to employees and to managers. There's got to be a level of engagement there that gets driven when people do have more control of their payroll and their retirement and their benefit selection. I mean, it really makes a lot of sense to have an HR platform that lets people participate more actively.

**Alison Stevens:**

Absolutely. And I think, you and I could probably agree that, right now, like the thing we crave most is feeling a sense of control, right? So having that ability to make changes to your banking and your payroll elections, having that control of your 401k, and being able to do it at a click of a button versus having to fill out paperwork or make a call.

**Alison Stevens:**

So really, I think it lends itself, as you said, not just to leaders and HR leaders, but also to the employees and helps improve engagement so that they feel like they have choices and flexibility in how they manage their financial situation.

**Rob Parsons:**

So I know a big part of what you and your team do, Alison, is try to look ahead. So I'm going to ask you to peer into your crystal ball a little bit here. Say it's a year from now, it's October 2021, what are HR leaders going to be focused on then?

**Alison Stevens:**

I feel like I need to get my imaginary crystal ball out. So, I'm optimistic, Rob. I hope that you and I have the chance to have another conversation together in person a year from now. But I think, in general, I think we're going to continue to see a trend and a focus towards, what is the future of work? When I think about that topic, I just think of so many more conversations and insights related to how are teams going to be organized? Are we going to start to see and make different decisions around how teams are organized, how they're led.

**Alison Stevens:**

We just talked about flexibility and so, how will flexible work arrangements, will they stay more of a permanent feature? I was just thinking about this the other day, like will flexible work arrangements actually be that key benefit, if you will, of how employers are going to attract employees to work at their company? Because, I don't know that we're necessarily going to not be thinking about how we work and where we work. I think flexible work arrangements are going to continue to be prevalent in the conversation around HR and leadership.

**Alison Stevens:**

I think also, many people are taking stock of what's important right now. So from an HR perspective, how can we retain our best employees. Employee engagement and wellbeing, making sure your employees are taken care of, that you're really leaning in to check in. Make sure they have what they need, give them the

avenues and the communication pathways to be able to communicate when they do need something or when they even just have a question and want that assurances, that they have the support that they need.

**Alison Stevens:**

So, I really think that the focus will continue to be on our employees, making sure that they are fully engaged and as from a leadership perspective, and an HR leadership perspective, that we continue to communicate with our employees in the best ways possible.

**Rob Parsons:**

I recently read too, there's some anticipation that the gig economy that we were hearing a lot about last year, may actually be accelerated. That we may be evolving, because it enables us to be more flexible, more nimble, more agile, really pulling in experts who are running their own...

**Rob Parsons:**

They're running their own lives. They're not beholden to a single employer. They are conducting their businesses remotely and being available to help a business anywhere across the country. And likewise, your talent pool now, can come from anywhere around the country. Have you heard and thought about that?

**Alison Stevens:**

I have. And it's really interesting, because this notion of flexible work arrangements, you kind of take away the work arrangement and just the notion of flexibility, right? That you can find a talented, from my perspective, we're constantly seeking HR professionals who want to come and work at Paychex and come work with us to deliver both best practices and HR advice and effective recommendations to our clients and have that variability and the opportunity to really get to know and learn and talk with so many different businesses across the United States.

**Alison Stevens:**

So yes, I'm starting to think about where will my talent pool come from and will I really need to be making decisions about geography when, in fact, now that whole flexibility and leveraging technology is not just about leveraging HR technology, but just leveraging technology period. And how you can now get to a customer, get to a client so much faster, because you're able to connect right in. We can have a call, a video call, with a client and very quickly see them in person on the screen and be able to communicate with them just as effectively.

**Alison Stevens:**

So, we're really looking into, what are those considerations around what is the future way that we communicate effectively? What's that methodology that's going to make sense, not just for my business, but for businesses across the United States of all types and industries.

**Rob Parsons:**

It's fantastic. It really is interesting. It does make me hopeful that we're going to see a lot of change, but it'll be a lot of change for the better.

**Alison Stevens:**

Exactly.

**Rob Parsons:**

So any parting thoughts for our listeners, anything the HR professionals and people concerned about their workforces, any thoughts you have just being so experienced in the industry and having been there and done that?

**Alison Stevens:**

My parting thought to HR leaders and business leaders out there, is that you're not alone. Here at Paychex, we have an incredible network and rely on each other for insights. You said at the top of the call, the collaboration between our teams has been incredible, and I'm so grateful. I've so enjoyed getting to know members of your team and just to watch all of the great content and the great work they've done. That partnership is something that I know I'm immensely proud of.

**Alison Stevens:**

Engage your network. I've spent a lot of time doing that over the past several months and have found it to be fantastic to expand my network, not only inside Paychex, but also outside. In fact, just last week, I had a Zoom call with some colleagues of mine that I worked with in my first job, right out of college. And it was wild to be talking to my first boss ever, and just listening and hearing to what everyone's doing right now, and just making those connections again, was awesome. But also, getting to know others in the HR industry, I've had the opportunity to have some conversations with Steve Boese and Trish McFarlane who are friends of Paychex, and that's been a really fantastic opportunity as it relates to expanding my network.

**Alison Stevens:**

Lastly, I've been listening to a lot of podcasts. I've become a podcast junkie. And I've learned so much. I've learned so much. Our Paychex podcasts are fantastic, but I've just listened to a ton of business podcasts and others just to kind of escape and listen to something funny and entertaining. So, my parting thoughts are, make sure you find some time for self-care, things that you can do to have fun, whether it be exercise, relax, listen to a podcast, watch your favorite TV show. Self-care is just as important as anything right now, I think, as I provide some of my parting thoughts to the audience today, Rob.

**Rob Parsons:**

I think that's great advice, Alison. I think that's something we can all pay attention to. Thank you so much for joining the podcast today. This was a great conversation.

**Alison Stevens:**

Thanks, Rob. It was so much fun to join you.

Speaker 3:

This podcast is property of Paychex Inc. 2020, all rights reserved.