

- [Narrator] You're listening to the HR Mix Tape, your podcast with the perfect mix of practical advice, thought-provoking interviews and stories that just hit different so that work doesn't have to feel well, like work. Now your host, Shari Simpson.

- Joining me today is Dave Pinkawa, engineering manager of virtualization here at Paylocity. As a father of two and an IT professional with an unconventional degree in political science, he's a self-proclaimed lifelong learner and is always looking to improve not only technical skills, but also social ones. Outside of work, aside from chasing after a toddler and an infant, he is the author of technical blogs, articles, and videos on IT automation. Dave, thanks so much for jumping on the podcast with me today.

- Thanks, yeah, good to be here.

- This is a little bit of a new format for our listeners, so we wanted to interview a employee, an individual contributor per se, to get a different perspective around what's happening in the tech space and our ideas around employee engagement. So Dave, thanks for being willing to do this pretty unique episode with me.

- Yeah, of course. It's gonna be fun. I've listened to a bunch of the podcasts already and happy to kinda switch it up here.

- I love it. So let's start with maybe you sharing a little bit about your background in tech.

- Sure. I think I've got a bit of a non-traditional start in tech. I've actually got a political science degree from University of Illinois at Chicago. I worked at the State Department for a little bit as an intern for a a season and came back to the Chicagoland area. Born and raised here, but I went to DC for that period of time and just realized, it was right at the end of that great recession. So job market was really tough and there wasn't much in the way that I could use the political science degree. So I started self-training for IT. I'd always been passionate about technology and tinkering and building computers on my own time, and that next step for me was actually getting formally certified. So I trained for what was the CompTIA A +, and the Network Plus and Microsoft certifications. And it's just been a continual growth over time, over the last, eight, nine years now, where that individual drive and interest, really kind of, really gives well with me for a tech career in the long term.

- I love hearing people's journey about how they just took the initiative and started learning. For those of you that don't know, podcasting is not my training. It's something that I felt we had a need for and taught myself how to do it, and I absolutely love that sort of drive that you have. It's just such a cool story. One of the reasons I wanted to talk to you is because there has been so much

turmoil in the tech sector in general. There's been a lot of layoffs, There's been a lot of chatter. What do you see as contributing to that?

- I think over the last bit of time, especially with COVID, a lot of tech companies were well positioned to be remote first and still grow and drive their business during the entirety of the lockdowns and the pandemic. So during that time, those tech companies continued to grow and others didn't. Maybe they grew too quick, or maybe they have been continually hiring for that a period of time, and it's like, oh, well, we're doing great during the pandemic because of our line of business. But now that, the world is kind of shifting to that post pandemic, COVID is now just more endemic and something that we all deal with on a day-to-day basis. Maybe their hiring projections, don't align with that post COVID state that we're in. So it might be a little bit of just right-sizing the employee population is kind of how I'm viewing it. In part two is, there's a bit of a inherent follow the leader mentality in tech companies. So if one company thinks that, oh, consumer spending is going to go down because of a potential recession, well, how do we stay profitable? Well, we might need to lower headcount in order to account for a particular downturn that might be coming, might not. But yeah, I don't see it as anything maybe systemically wrong. I think it's just the nature of the economy and some of the uncertainty about the recession and mostly around that.

- Do you see AI or the advancements in AI having an impact on the tech sector from a hiring perspective and even a headcount perspective?

- I think in the long term you'll see it more as like a force multiplier of some of the employees that you do have. So right now it is still super early stages. Chat GPT 3 came out and took the world by storm. They're now already on a next major revision of Chat GPT 4, refining how that AI works as a language model. And you see it used in bits and pieces. It's great for building job descriptions and some more of the form formulaic things, but using this in an actual tech role does come with challenges, just like with any new tool. So, just as an example, if you're writing code as a individual contributor and you're like, oh, I need to do this. The code that Chat GPT provides is not going to be secure. There are all sorts of legal concerns about, well, if you're putting proprietary information into Chat GPT, how is that data getting processed and handled? Is it secure? Is that safe for your company's data? So there's a lot of questions and concerns around, is this safe to use in a company sense, if we don't own how that data's getting processed? So I think as that matures, I think you'll see it used more and more. But right now you need to give it some guardrails. Part of my past as well, and it's something I had stopped recently, was I was doing continuing education instruction at Harper College after hours for a few years. And that direct mentorship, asking questions, getting a direct answer from somebody knowledgeable, I can see Chat GPT actually entering that kind of

training space very well, where, oh, I have a question just really quick about how does this work? Or how do I approach this? You can ask Chat GPT and get a direct response within seconds versus needing to take a full formal class around something. Now that's not to say that there's no benefit with the in-person training. I love that that whole dynamic of an instructor and all the peers essentially. Chat GPT does have its use. I think as a training tool, it'll be fantastic.

- Yeah, I couldn't agree more. I think having access to, I feel like it's Google on steroids in a way, it gives you just, it gets very clear about an answer. So I love that. I'm gonna switch gears a little bit. Thinking about the tech market and some of these new technologies coming out and everything that we've put on them, both, for those that are in tech companies and how we are seeing how tech companies are handling things, how is this impacting individual tech employee's engagement? What have you seen.

- At least when it comes to the amount of technology out there? It is, I wanna say borderline overwhelming, but it can be overwhelming. There's always some new tool to learn, especially, being a knowledge worker of any kind, it's like, well, if I don't learn this tool am I going to fall behind? Am I going to learn this new programming language? Will I fall behind? And some people can approach that with a growth mindset and go, "Oh, I wanna learn the basics of it." And if you take a step back, there is a commonality between all of these different tools and there's a logic behind all the tools and programming languages that is kind of universal across them. And I think if you work on kind of your own personal aptitude and growth mindset, I think if you make, you make the unknown something approachable to you, then regardless of the technology, you can say, "Oh, well I haven't worked with that, but I will take some time and give me a day or two. I can at least come to terms with the terminology, the basics of the technology." There's not a need to know a full laundry list of a hundred different items and different programming languages, if you can kind of learn on the fly and have that aptitude to approach the unknown with some curiosity.

- So you've been at your organization since 2018, so I always love to ask this to people who've been in a role or an organization for a long time. What has kept you personally engaged?

- I think it's just a lot to do with my own journey that throughout my career, like I mentioned, having gone from political science background, which is very not tech related, and growing into tech. I've always had that drive to learn. I've been a big learner. I love reading books. My wife and I have books all over the house. You could see some here if you're looking at the video version of this podcast. So that learning mentality, that constant growth mentality is just, core to my personality, especially in the professional space. And I think that applies very well to the company I'm at, because things are

always changing. Things are always growing, or getting more complicated or adding new technologies and just being open and embracing the change and using it as a tool. Oh, I don't know how to do that, but I'm gonna grow into it. I'm gonna approach it. I'll read something. I'll be able to have a peer group, like a luncheon learn session to get a bunch of smart brains in the same room and kind of iron out details. And that really just excites me. That's where my passion lies, is I love learning new things and I like the idea that everyone has something to share. If you've learned something, there's always going to be someone that can help learn from you, and no one should be shy about, imparting some of that knowledge. Everyone has something to share.

- That's so true. There's been so many times in my career where I've had, the internal conversation, like, who am I to be in this room? Who am I to? And I don't wanna say necessarily imposter syndrome, but you have those generalities where you ask those questions like, do I have enough experience? Do I have enough breath in my experience? But you're absolutely right, everybody has something to share because everybody has a really unique perspective and their journey has been unique to them. And so they've picked up nuggets along the way that somebody else hasn't. So if you're listening and you don't think you have enough experience or enough breath, you do, and be brave and share the things that you have because you bring your own unique experience and lens to the conversation. Dave, as you have been in this space for so long and you've seen what's happening in the tech industry and you've gone through the pandemic, things that we have seen around mental health from an HR perspective have been challenging to say the least. We wanna protect our employees. We wanna make sure that they're safe and healthy and also productive, right? We have to meet our business goals and all those kinds of things. And when I think about the tech sector specifically, a lot of roles have been remote pre pandemic, and so they had a leg up on, on some of the remote life stuff, but a lot changed for everybody else, which definitely affected those in the tech space. How have you navigated protecting your own mental health? As a tech person?

- Oh, it's always an exercise that you have to just be mindful of, to know where your strengths lie. You need to know where your stressors are and which kinds of stress you can handle. Burnout is a very real thing across all of tech. There's signs that you can see. There's all sorts of research that you can read about it. But when you see those personality shifts in coworkers and things, I find it nice to just ask them in a casual conversation, how are things going? And it doesn't mean that, you don't have to be a leader. You don't have to be a manager to ask these questions. It's nice to just know and pay attention to the emotional wellbeing of the peers at your company, the people on your team, and being able to reach out and have that kind of comfortable conversation about, what's happening? Do you need someone to talk to about it? Is there something in our particular line of work

that's stressful that you need, guidance or you know, a recommendation on some training materials, anything that might help alleviate some of that stress is certainly helpful. And speaking of the pandemic when it comes to, HR resources at a company, it's not something that everyone maybe looks at and goes, "Oh, I need an employee resource group for X, Y, or Z topic." But knowing that they're there is very comforting. Personally, I have a child that just very recently got diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder level two, and that has been yet another mental health concern. 'Cause I'm, you know, how can I get the tools and how can I best support their growth from a young age, given that we now know this new information and my company has been able to provide these safe spaces for, oh, people that are going through this non neurotypical kind of environment or have questions about it. There are safe spaces that HR and the company has provided. So I think a company providing that kind of, I don't wanna say safety net, but just a place of comfort, a place of acceptance for what could be going on in your life, even if it's not right now. I knew that that place existed and it was, it's very comforting and helps alleviate some of that, stress when it comes to mental health. What a positive thing to hear for HR professionals for the work that we're doing to create those spaces and the impact it's having on you personally. I really appreciate you being willing to share your personal story there because I think sometimes we do this work in HR and we don't see the impact or we don't hear those positive things, so I appreciate that.

- Of course.

- So I want to switch gears a little bit again. As Dave and I were preparing for this episode, one of the things we talked about that we haven't done on the episode yet is flip the script and have somebody else take over the mic. So we're gonna switch roles a little bit here. And Dave, I think you have some questions you prepared to ask me today.

- I do. First off the bat, what does someone in HR position look for in an employee that may be looking to transfer from an individual contributor position to more of a leadership position on their team?

- Oh, I love this question. I don't think we get asked it enough. So, there's a couple things that I've always looked for in my career when I'm looking at somebody to make that transition from individual contributor to leader, team leader, manager, supervisor, any of those things. The first one is, are they preparing themselves for their role? Are they getting ready? Are they thinking about the skills that they need? Are they doing the research, reading the books, going to the classes? I think sometimes we think that developing management or leadership skills has to be very formal and it doesn't. A lot of it comes from either volunteering or reading or listening to podcasts like this one or other things to prepare yourself for that role. So preparation, I always look for preparation. Second thing is ownership.

Are they demonstrating ownership in their own role for mistakes, for taking risk, for ideas? Do they have that sense of ownership where I know that they're gonna be able to take ownership of a team and help align it to business objectives. The other thing that sometimes we talk about is getting caught doing the role. So sometimes when you're in an individual contributor role and you start to take on more responsibilities or you ask for more things, as leaders, we look for those that are willing to kind of step in and practice a role. Those that are curious to ask the questions of, "Hey, can I be in the room?" Or they're trying to figure things out from, how does that work? Or how did you make that decision? Those are all things that kind of fall underneath the get caught doing the role, right? We're, we're starting to see them think in a different way. I will make a note though, when it comes to that move from individual contributor to leader, I think sometimes we focus on our high potentials and we go, oh, that person's really, really good at being an individual contributor. Let's promote them. And often they get promoted beyond what they're capable of, right? It's called the Peter principle. We have to ask people if they wanna be promoted. I think sometimes we just assume that there is this ladder approach to them wanting to take the next step. And sometimes that's not true. They just wanna get really, really deep in their role and they don't wanna manage, they don't wanna be in charge of people. And so knowing where leadership looks like for that employee is really important.

- Yeah, that's some great insights. What could be a successful or not, step into a leadership position if you're prepared and if you're taking or assuming that role for the right reasons. I think that makes sense. I guess next question here then is what hurdles or gaps are HR and hiring professionals seeing in the tech hiring space?

- Yeah, so I did phone a friend on this one 'cause I knew you were gonna ask me it. And I wanted to make sure that I had some details or some thoughts from some of the higher level tech people in our own organization and they aligned with what I thought. But there was one really interesting thing. So, despite all the layoffs, hiring tech people right now still remains challenging. You'd think that, the market is now saturated with all these tech employees with this tech experience. But what has happened now is that there's, jobs or talent acquisition professionals are being inundated with applications. So you'll post a role and you'll get 500, 600 applications where there's definitely other industries and other roles that are struggling, right? To even get applicants. This is the opposite side of that problem. So you're getting inundated with all of these applications, but that's not necessarily the cream of the crop that you're getting, right? So when organizations do layoffs, there's all sorts of methodology behind it. Sometimes though, the most valuable employees aren't the ones getting laid off. So now you have this giant pool of candidates that might not be the talent that you actually wanna bring into your organization. And so you have to start having those

conversations about, what kind of person do we need? What level do we need? What experience do they need? And what's the influx of applications that we're getting? And then when you, when you think about hiring something very specific, right? It gets even more complicated. So if you need somebody who's specialized in data engineering or cloud architecture, it gets even more complicated. So I would say those are the biggest hurdles when you're thinking about hiring in the tech space is just weeding through all of that candidate information and making sure that you are picking the right people and that the background that they have aligned with what you're trying to accomplish for your business.

- That makes sense from a technical perspective and just how much you need to sift through to, to see if it matches the needs of the company. When it comes to maybe some of the more intangible qualities that you might look for though, do you have a top three that you look for outside of.

- Yeah, absolutely.

- Tech skill, you know, list that you might find on a resume.

- Yeah, for sure. So I always look for curiosity, right? Somebody who's just really curious, not only from a technical perspective, right? How does that code work? How does that product work, but curiosity and how the work that they're doing is gonna align to business objectives, right? How is what I'm doing as an individual contributor going to help our end user? And I think somebody who gets really curious about that can find a lot of value in the work they do because sometimes, you might get brought into an organization, you might be working on code that just bores you or the the product bores you that you're working on inside of that organization. And so how can you get curious about how that's solving problems? So I look for that. I look for grit and agility kind of hand in hand, right? How willing are you to be able to pivot. You talked about earlier being in a fast changing organization, right? And a lot of times that lends yourself, and I'll speak personally even in the HR space where you're working on a project and it's going really well and you think you're going to get to the finish line and then leadership decides they no longer want that project or they don't want that work. So you can feel, you can end up feeling like you are a hamster running in a hamster wheel, but the reality is that you're gaining some very valuable skills and the work you're doing is very important. So how do you have that grit and agility to be able to say, okay, we are pivoting, but that wasn't a wasted experience and so what can I learn from that and move on and quickly iterate on what we're doing? So grit and agility. And then the last thing is not being afraid to take risk. Willing to make mistakes and learn from them. The most important moments in my career have often been on the tail end of a really bad mistake. And the lessons that I learned from that. I think we all have this list in our head

when we think about going back to, moving from an individual contributor to a manager, is the things we're not going to do because we had a bad manager or the things we are going to do because we had a great manager. And so that comes with being able to make mistakes and learn from them.

- That's great. And then the last question I've got is, this being a tech focused episode is, what's your favorite piece of technology you've played with recently in or out work?

- There's so many good ones. I'm kind of a tech dork by heart, so I'm the person who's always willing to learn something new. It's funny, I actually joked with my husband recently. Our youngest is graduating, has graduated high school and he'll be heading to the military in just a couple days actually. And I joked that I'm not gonna be on the forefront of all the young language anymore because I won't have a teenager in the house. And so I think the same thing about tech, like how do I stay current as I get older and make sure that I'm on the forefront of tech. So one of the things that I have really enjoyed using is a tool called Jasper AI. So it's similar to Chat GPT, it's a little bit more robust in what it offers. It's an online tool, but it does things like help you outline blog posts. It has a chat feature and it, it helps you with like social media planning and captions for social media posts. What I've loved about it is it's really helped me be a better marketer for somebody who has a background in HR and business, but doesn't have that social media viral training, right? And it has given me the ability to almost have like a sounding board for my ideas. I'm not the kind of person who's just gonna copy and paste from an AI somewhere. I think that you lose your individuality when you do that personally, but it has helped me think about things that maybe I haven't thought of when I'm working through a project or I'm working through a blog post and it's given me some really great ideas. So yeah, Jasper AI is one that I use a lot so.

- Neat, I hadn't heard of that one. Sounds good. I'll have to check it out.

- Yeah.

- Awesome. Dave, this was great. I loved flipping the script today and hopefully our audience got a little bit of insight on what it's like to be a tech employee and some of the things that we think about from the tech perspective in HR. So thanks for taking a few minutes of your day, Dave.

- Yeah, thank you for having me.

- [Narrator] I hope you enjoyed today's episode. You can find show notes and links at the theHRMixTape.com, Come back often and please subscribe, rate and review.