

## Rethinking Talent Matching: Bridging the Gap Between Skills and Opportunities with Alexandra Levitt

Shari Simpson: You're listening to the HR Mixtape. 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.

Shari Simpson: Joining me today is Alexandra Levitt, the founder and CEO of Inspiration at Work, focused on preparing organizations for future success. A Wall Street Journal columnist and Thinkers 50 honoree, she consults on workforce trends and DEI issues for Fortune 500 companies.

Alexandra Levitt: Alexandra, thank you so much for sitting down on the podcast with me today. You're welcome, Shari. It's really great to be here. I'd love if you could start by sharing a little bit about your background, your passion, why you do the work you do.

Announcer: Sure. Well, I'm a workforce futurist and that boggles people's minds. They're like, what is a futurist? And really it just means that I work with organizations, mostly governments and companies to try to ascertain what has the greatest potential for disruption in the workforce. So an example is looking at the likelihood that we would go to distributed work at some point back before COVID, and kind of looking at the factors that might lead that to become a reality in the future. So we're looking at things like not only a pandemic, but climate change, technology, and all these factors that come together. So that's what I do. And I actually got into this about 20 years ago, by accident. And the reason that I got into it is I wrote this book called They Don't Teach Corporate in College. And at the time, there was a new generation of 20 somethings coming into the workforce called the millennials. Yeah, that were making a huge splash. And companies wanted to know what are these millennials going to need in the future? What kind of leaders are they going to be? And they were asking me and I'm like, I don't know. I just wrote a book for 20 something. So I had to go out and research it. And gradually over time, I started making informal forecasts about not only the millennials, but about other things. And the thing about being a futurist is the only way you know you're any good at it is if you wait. Right. So 20 years have gone by, and I'm lucky some of my forecasts have come to fruition. They're not all good things, but I really enjoy this work. I love meeting organizations and seeing all the wonderful technology on the show floor that's going to help usher us into what's now going to be the mid 21st century.

Alexandra Levitt: Yeah, I cringe every time I hear somebody say now, oh, you were born in the 1900s. I mean, technically, that's true, but you didn't have to say it that way.

Announcer: That's really funny. Right. So I was born like, well, I mean, I wasn't even I was born in the 1970s.

Alexandra Levitt: Yeah. So I want to talk about leadership and women and DEI, kind of all those topics and with that future forward kind of mentality. So, you know, I think about the leadership capabilities

that are needed now. And I was joking with my husband the other day, actually, as we were, so he's a firefighter and we were talking about how that career has changed so much that it used to be, you know, before the, advancement of some of the things like better sprinkler systems and that kind of stuff that firemen fought more fires than they do now. Now they spend more time doing medical calls and a lot of those medical calls are mental health related. They've had to be upskilled. They've had to be upskilled. And the thing that we were talking about was maybe we're going to see a shift in the gender demographics of firefighters and paramedics because women might be coming into that workforce with more empathy, those kinds of skills that are going to be needed. You know, as we think about the capabilities that have changing, what are some of the things that you're seeing that women specifically should be thinking about their upskilling as they prepare for the future?

Announcer: This is really interesting, and it kind of goes back to what we're talking about at the conference as a whole, which is the notion of A.I. coming in and taking jobs or not necessarily taking them completely, but taking over parts of jobs. And the thing about A.I. is that by itself, it's not good. People don't really understand that they think they can outsource an entire function to AI. And in fact, AI always requires a human in the loop to oversee it. And this is a skill set that nobody really has right now. And that's why so many organizations here are concerned about learning and development, because all of a sudden they have this skill set. I call it actually applied technology skills, which refers to you don't necessarily need to know how to build an algorithm or code a website, but you need to know that there's technology out there. to do your job more effectively. So everybody who's an HR practitioner who's at the HR technology conference, they have these applied technology skills, you can tell because they know they need to go and look at what technology is available to solve whatever problem they would have, whether it's we need to figure out how to redeploy our people. We need to get them greater skills. We're losing the younger generation. And there's a variety of different problems that organizations face. And there's a technology here for every single one of them. So to go back to your question about women, applied technology skills is definitely one of those areas. And I actually put it under the larger umbrella of technological curiosity. Because it's not just about knowing what is around right now, but being able to tinker with it and say, hey, you know what, I might be able to apply this to X, Y, and Z. And I think that's a really valuable skill for everyone, but particularly women, because some of the other skills that women are even better at If they don't have those applied technology skills, then it's going to be hard to put together a whole package. But some of those other skills, global perspective and diplomacy, is one that women are really uniquely poised to be good at. Flexibility at modeling, juggling a lot of things at once, effective work-life integration, and of course, emotional intelligence. Women have been shown over and over to have naturally higher EQ. And these are things that are all incredibly

important when we think about the role of the human in the human-machine partnership. What value does a person bring? Well, it's things like judgment, creative problem solving, diplomacy, and things that no matter how good an AI gets until it has generalized intelligence, which could happen, but it's not the case now. That is the unique value that we provide as humans. And it just so happens that women tend to be stronger in those areas.

Alexandra Levit: Well, and I appreciate the language tend to be right. Yeah. Like we're saying a generality on purpose. You know, if you know who Jeff Harty is, he talks about feminine traits and masculine traits. That's kind of how he defines it. So I so I appreciate that. There is this need, though, for diversity in thought in approaches and I think about Gen Z a lot because I remember that space when millennials were coming into the workforce and it was like every HR conference there was multiple sessions on what's happening with the millennials. I haven't seen the tipping point happen yet for Gen Z. We're just starting to see that. What are you seeing their expectations and how do we get ready for them?

Announcer: Well, I think one of the reasons we haven't seen the tipping point is that only about half of them are in the workforce right now. I am seeing a lot more than I did a couple of years ago. And what I am seeing with them, it's actually a little bit frightening, to be honest. I mean, they are amazing young people, but they've had a lot of challenges. They have kind of a combined situation of a lot of them were coming of age during COVID or coming into the workforce during COVID and had a completely different situation. and context to work than any other previous generation. They also have the worst mental health of any generation that has been studied, which goes all the way back to the baby boomers. Why is that the case? Well, some suspect it's due to screens. We don't really know. maybe these things are being diagnosed more. But bottom line is they're coming in with a lot of challenges. And we have to remember that they're not fully baked when they come in. And people made the same complaints about the Millennials. They said, oh, they don't know how to communicate. Oh, they want everything. They're entitled. And so we hear some of the same things. But I would say just envision that your Gen Zers are their kids still. And they didn't learn the interpersonal skills that we did because they were raised on screens. So employers get upset at the fact that people will come in and not know how to communicate, but they haven't had the opportunity. It's not about a lack of competence. It's just a lack of experience. So we have to prepare to go way back to basics with Gen Z. And I think that's OK. And you really want to have training programs specifically for the new Gen Z's that are coming in. Sometimes I get pushback on this or like, Alex, I can't offer things to the younger employees that I don't offer to everyone else. I think you do, especially when it comes to really comprehensive in-person onboarding, because the fully remote workforce does not work for these folks. They don't know anything else. They don't know how to have a conversation in the kitchen or in the elevator. They need those experiences. So

Alexandra Levit: That is what I would recommend for people to get ready for Gen Z. It's interesting because I I'm curious as a as a futurist that that approach is our organizations teaching them how to do it kind of the current way. What ways do you see Gen Z is going to push us to do things differently?

Announcer: Well, it's interesting. I was just in a session where somebody was combating the myth that Gen Zers don't want to be in person. They want to do everything via technology. And I've noticed that as well, that they're craving this in-person connection. So where I think they're going to be really good examples is how to approach a work project. from the perspective of where can the machine add the most value? And where can I as the human add the most value? And I really like their attitude toward what I call rapidly assembled teams, which means that employment is not just about full time, not just about we hire someone, we give them a whole bunch of benefits, and they're just going to be with us, but we don't actually know what they're going to do. So a rapidly assembled team is looking at it more from the contracting perspective, like, okay, I've got a business problem, I'm going to assemble a team from all types of sources. I've got maybe retired seniors that have some institutional knowledge. I've got subject matter experts. I can have a freelance employee. I can have somebody from a different function, someone from a different geography. And I can bring all these people together to work on this one project to solve this specific problem, and then I can disband it. and people can go about their their merry ways. I think Gen Z leaders and the millennials to some extent will be much more comfortable with this type of employment arrangement where it's highly customized to what you want to be doing at that time. And organizations are going to become a lot smaller. And I think Gen Z that they're going to be comfortable working for a whole bunch of employers instead of just having this one experience. It's just different. But I think it's it's well aligned with where we're probably going as a society.

Alexandra Levit: Well, and it'll be exciting to see how that change disrupts things like benefit offerings and packages and how we think about pay, when we pay, how we pay, what it looks like. So that's definitely gonna have an impact.

Announcer: Yeah. And the whole notion of a full time salary. It's like, well, what does it even mean to be full time? I mean, we could completely go philosophical here and say, the nature of the employee employer relationship is really changing. And we don't necessarily have the one job with the one salary. And how do you compensate people for their skills and for a specific job versus just for, you know, you're going to, we're going to own you for a year or two. Like I think that model people are seeing with the fact that we have to be so nimble and that if we hire a whole bunch of people, like we might need them for something else or we might not need them for anything. And that's where you see the tremendous layoffs that are so incredibly damaging to people and to companies and their reputations. Like, if you didn't hire those people in the first place, as full timers, maybe you wouldn't have to do so many layoffs.

Alexandra Levit: So yeah, I mean, that's such a good point. Thinking about the makeup of your workforce, attacking it a different way. I want to hone in a little bit on women, because I just think you have a really interesting perspective on it. I think about in my own career, a lot of things that I was taught as a woman was how to act like a man how to show up. You know, I remember somebody telling me very early on my career that I should learn how to golf. I don't like golfing.

Announcer: I was told that also.

Alexandra Levit: I just don't. I don't want to learn how to do it. It doesn't appeal to me. Not to say I don't understand the concept of networking and relationships and doing business outside of the business room. What are the skills that women actually need to be working on and upskilling? I guess even what is the skills that leaders need to upskill, right? Maybe it isn't shouldn't be specific to women.

Announcer: Yeah, well, I think technological curiosity is one of those and being willing to be innovative and to tinker and to experiment. I don't know that and this is probably going to be controversial, but I don't know that it's changed that much that women in business still need to kind of act like men. And we still see when we look at pay disparities. that women are paid less, they're promoted less frequently than men. And the more that we go in and advocate for ourselves and are assertive and ask for what we deserve, the higher we're going to get. And so to some degree, I don't know that that's really moved that much. I was saying in my session that the whole area of equity and gender equity has not moved as fast as I would have hoped. We still only have 10% of Fortune 500 CEOs that are women. Why is that? That really doesn't make any sense. So I think that where again, we will really shine is in these unique human qualities that will be necessary for the proper oversight of machine labor. Like that is something that hasn't been necessary before. So in fact, it was a little bit of a downside of women that they would come to the workplace with high EQ, with high sensitivity, compassion, intuition. It was looked upon as a weakness. Yeah. Whereas now that's going to become a huge strength and that's going to be what makes us differentiated as human workers. So I think the tide may be turning, but I don't think we're quite there yet, especially in the leadership realm. I wish I could say something else, but I'm a realist.

Alexandra Levit: How do you see HR professionals helping with that gender parity? I mean, we spend so much time looking at the data, right? Like we look at pay equity and we're making decisions there. We're looking at our leadership pipeline and the broken rungs and kind of like the staples, right? There's already staples that we're looking at. But like you said, it's going so slow. Yeah.

Announcer: What else should we be doing? It's really not rocket science. Yesterday I asked the audience, I think there are a couple hundred people there. I said, how many of you have implemented any kind of pay equity software? And like five people raised their hands. Wow. Like to me, that's table stakes. OK, do some benchmarking. See where you are in comparison to your competitors. Where are the people

inside your organization in comparison to each other? And is this fair? Like, can you standardize it? And I think most companies are not even doing that. And this comes, this is part of the larger HR tech theme for me this year, is that I think the vendors are moving faster than their clients. I think customers still need basics. And like we can do bells and whistles. And I do think things like on demand pay are fantastic for frontline workers in particular. But we need to go back to let's do a huge analysis of how we're doing pay currently and make sure that we're doing it right. And this is no longer just a moral imperative. It's a legal imperative. We're seeing increasing compliance and regulation in this area. And another thing I want to talk about is pay transparency. I do not understand why companies just don't get on board with this. It's like they have to be led to it kicking and screaming. And you're gonna have to tell people what the position pays anyway. Like, don't be forced to because it makes you look bad. Be out in front of this. You should be proud to share what a position pays. And if you are being transparent, and you are being there and you've done your analysis using appropriate software and data, then you shouldn't have a problem with this. But the reluctance to embrace this, even while it's a massive global trend, is a little troubling.

Alexandra Levit: Do you think there's fear in organizations that they're going to have to be held accountable for their decisions? You know, I think back to like when the law changed around protecting workers being able to talk about their salaries with each other, right? And I remember the chatter that happened and it was like, oh my gosh, people knowing what other people make and it's going to be a huge problem and I remember thinking, how is this a problem? Like we can have honest conversations now about performance and saying, yeah, Jill makes 10 grand more than you because she came to the table with two more years experience and she has these bigger projects and that kind of stuff.

Announcer: Because it's objective versus subjective. And that's what we need. And it's easy to do with software. That's why I don't understand why more companies don't. I mean, this is one of the, in my mind, one of the simpler problems that we're all facing here at HR Tech. I mean, there are some things that are much bigger. And to me, pay equity software is obvious.

Alexandra Levit: Yeah, I think that's it. Like you said, I think it's a it's a table stakes. Yeah. How do you see us using technology as we move forward to our benefit of creating a more diverse workforce? And I'm I'm thinking beyond the simple things like, right, we can put pronouns now in the tool or we can collect, you know, I don't mean that kind of stuff, like really thinking about how technology is going to help us take that next step on our DEI journey.

Announcer: It's so important. That's a really great question. And I think the main thing that technology does for DEIB, in addition to helping with things like bias, is that it really levels the playing field with respect to workplace participation. And what I mean by that is that with distributed work, it becomes less important what your

individual circumstances are. So, for example, we saw during the pandemic that women who are pregnant who were doing all of their calls on Zoom and no one ever saw that they were pregnant did not have any of the same discrimination that they normally face in the workforce. And by the way, that's the that is the biggest area of discrimination is working mothers. and pregnant mothers. For some reason, that's been really, really intractable. So that's one area. And then, of course, with respect to racial and ethnic diversity and even sexual orientation, it is much easier when you're in a distributed workforce to kind of be perceived in the way you want to be perceived and to do your job in a way that works for you and your lifestyle. And one of the things we're seeing is that organizations are doing these return to work mandates. And if they're tracking it, they see that there is a disproportionately negative impact on women of color. That's in part due to things like commuting, due to the fact that they are caring for extended families, and they just have a lot going on. So having to go to an office is actually kind of a hardship. So by having a hybrid distributed work and having more flexibility, we are going to, I would say, naturally improve our DEIB outcomes. And one thing is for sure, if you're going to have a return to office mandate, make sure you are in fact tracking if that is dinging your participation from a diversity perspective, because I'm willing to bet that it is. But a lot of companies aren't even thinking about that. And they're like, oh, if you ask them, like, oh, I think we haven't really lost that many women of color. It's like, well, have you measured it? Because that would be a really good idea.

Alexandra Levit: Yeah, for sure. As we wrap our discussion and you think in this topic in the DEI space looking forward, what is like the one thing that's on your mind or you're thinking about that you're like, man, we got to solve this one problem for us to be successful as I look forward?

Announcer: Now that would be talent matching. And what I mean by that is we've got all of these claims that there are labor shortages, that there's not the right talent to fill jobs. And yet we have people that are chronically unemployed, that are very depressed and anxious because they have been unemployed, they're applying for jobs, they're not hearing from anyone. So how can we properly match the talent that's available to the jobs that are available? And this goes both for full time work, for contract work, we need to have AI in on the game. And there's a lot of companies here who are doing this to better tease out what are some of the adjacent skills that people have in one job. that could allow them to be redeployed into another job. We don't want to be so narrow about what people are capable of doing, what their potential is. And I fear that we're a little slow on the uptake for this because the technology has been around for almost a decade now. And it's been in the market even for a while. And still we have the situation where we have all these labor shortages and yet people can't get a job. And I hear this, by the way, not just at the junior level or what you would call some of the less marketable levels. It's happening at the senior level as well, too. Senior people are being

laid off and they're out of work for months and months. These people with incredible institutional knowledge and incredible expertise. And it's like, why is that? And I've personally found that sometimes it's because hiring managers are just really unimaginative about what people are capable of doing. Like, just because you haven't worked at this type of company before, you still have the skills, but you haven't done this exact thing. Well, talent intelligence, which is the broad area that we're talking about, helps to solve those problems. Alexandra Levit: Somebody needs to invent a global job skill set evaluation tool, like Jan, for accommodations. Whoever figures that out is going to make a lot of money.

Announcer: You're totally right.

Alexandra Levit: You're totally right. Well, this has been a great conversation. Thanks for taking a few minutes to sit and chat with me.

Announcer: Thanks for having me, Shari. It was fun.

Shari Simpson: I hope you enjoyed today's episode. You can find show notes and links at [thehrmixtape.com](http://thehrmixtape.com). Come back often and please subscribe, rate, and review.