Announcer: 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 Elatia Abate. Elatia is an expert in helping individuals and companies thrive amidst disruption and prepare for the future. Since 2013, she has developed innovative strategies and tools to build resilience and flexibility, empowering her clients to navigate unpredictable shifts. Elatia's work challenges assumptions, turning data-driven insights into actionable solutions that foster growth, creativity, and fulfillment. Elatia, thank you so much for jumping on the podcast with me. Thank you for having me. I'm thrilled to be here. So we have spent the last year really getting to know each other and your role as a futurist. So I'd love if we could talk about, um, as you look at revolutionizing leadership, what are some of the fundamental changes you believe HR leaders are really going to need to implement to be effective as we look towards the future?

Elatia Abate: Yeah, I love this question so much. I think the underlying logic that people can anchor into to help this transition is the following. Assembly line logic does not apply in an AI landscape. So what this means, on the one hand, is that so much of what we've been taught about what works, the processes and procedures that we've had, might not apply anymore and they might not work. However, and there's no need to freak out about this, because there's a whole series of leadership tools and strategies and frameworks that people can use to move away from what I'll call being driven by expertise and learning how to pilot the emergence. It's learning how to thrive in so much rapid change.

Shari Simpson: I'm sure HR is like, great, more change as we think about it. How do we prepare to manage that type of rapid change going forward. And I think about things like, you know, we're going to introduce more gig work. We have, you know, remote employees, hybrid environments, AI collaborators are going to become commonplace in our world. How do we plan for addressing change really differently than maybe we've ever done before?

Elatia Abate: Yeah, so I think first and foremost, just acknowledging that it's okay to be afraid of the change and to be resistant to it. Because it does feel like, and I love that you said this, it does feel like so much more change. Again, again, why can't we just get back to normal or get to stasis or something? And when I started all of my work around the future of work, I thought that the central question that we were answering was how might we empower our success in the face of great uncertainty and disruption. Success in our jobs, success in businesses, success in society. But really, what I've come to see is that the size, scale, and scope of the change that we're moving through is so great that we want to empower our success in the face of uncertainty and disruption that has no foreseeable end. And while that can feel scary, there's a great answer to that, which is something that I call regenerative resilience. And we've talked about this in

the Paylocity space before. But it's learning really how to combine three things of clarity, clarity of purpose, direction, value in the company space. This means culture, clarity, then moving on to fearlessness, understanding that we don't need to be simply reactive to the fear and the disruption that's happening, but rather we can not only control our reaction to it, but guide others to do the same. And then third, connection. And this is where I think the real strength of HR comes into play, is that for as much as AI is changing everything that we're doing in the workplace, it is also shouting an invitation for us to connect better as human beings who we are.

Shari Simpson: So I've talked on the podcast before about the skills you're going to need for the future. One of those being learning AI, right? If you are going to be a successful HR partner, you can't ignore this new technology. You're going to have to embrace it. What are some of the other skills though that you are currently seeing a gap in as we've increased automation and we have to become more strategic and able to make those decisions quicker with better data?

Elatia Abate: Yeah, that question is the central question because we have there are so many articles about upskilling and reskilling and digital transformation and the AI program of the day that I need to learn how to prompt engineer for all of that exists. And it's important. Where there's a real hole in the conversation, which is what I'm up to the business of filling right now is what does leadership do? how do we shift from that assembly line logic and learn how to dance with what's occurring right now? And there's a strategic spectrum that you and I have also spoken about before and we have in the Paylocity space, but there are three main questions to it that really crack open or provide a platform on which people can begin to build strategy that both contemplates what we've done in the past and the things that we hold dear and important and what we know will continue to help our organizations thrive and move forward with the speed that's occurring. And the first question, it's a past anchored question. It asks, what can we logically do with what we've already done and what we already know? That's taken the data that we have, the team that we have, everything that we're already holding in-house. The second question focuses on the future. It says, OK, free of constraints of the past, given that we're here with whatever's going on, what do we want to create? And so that allows for some dreaming and some forward focus. But the third question is what really allows us to focus right now and asks right now in this very moment what's emerging around us, what's emerging on the market, what's emerging on our teams, what's emerging in our organizations. And these three questions together can help not only create strategies that are more robust, but also help people acknowledge when and as quickly as change is happening.

Shari Simpson: What an amazing way to frame the skills we're going to need. And I appreciate that you call out the fact that it can be scary. You know, I think living in that uncertainty is not a space that HR likes to sit in. You know, often we end up being risk mitigators or, you know, what does the law say or those kinds of

things. How do we how do we push ourselves personally to start living in that fear a little bit more? You know, is there exercises or baby steps that you've coached people to, to get there so they can open their mind? Because as you talk about this, the passion comes in that creativity that you mentioned, like, it's so exciting. So how do we not hold ourselves back? Yes.

Elatia Abate: So I leaning into that creativity first, I think there's understanding that for as much as we're reading about in media and wherever else we're reading, it sounds like we're walking in through a doorway of doom and gloom and that everything's coming to an end and the crisis, crisis, crisis. Things are changing, so that can feel like crisis, which it doesn't necessarily, those things aren't necessarily equal. But what we're really inside of and what AI can help us do is a window of empowerment in which we can create spaces that are more just, more equitable, where there's more opportunity for everybody. And that is what I think is incredibly exciting. So what are the micro steps that we can start to take to get to dance with the uncomfortableness that it is? And there's a. As simple really as the brain stretching of turning left instead of turning right on your way to work, not inviting your brain to think differently about something, ordering a slightly different sandwich at lunch every day than you do. But beyond that, things like improv comedy classes. This for me is I started taking improv classes and performing improv when I was in high school. And that has been foundationally one of the greatest ingredients to help me deal with disruption. And then if you want to take it to sort of a master class or a next level, there's a practice that I learned with a friend of mine from business school, Christopher Spikes, called creative self-destruction. which once a quarter you get together with your teams and you say, okay, if I could, if I had a magic wand, a fairy wand and could say in a year from now, this is what my company is going to be looking like, what our team, our engagement, you know, fill in the blank, whatever your metrics are. Then the next question, what does that look like? So you paint that picture. Then the next question you ask is, what is the person in my role need to be able to do to run that version of the company or the team or the project? Then the third question, which is the challenging one for most of us, is am I that person today? And usually the answer is no. But that's OK, because then what comes next is, what do I need to learn or unlearn or do or undo in order to become that person? And so these four questions do a lot of things. First, they help an organization and team create outsized results. So that's the first thing. But secondly, and this is where I really think the benefit is over the long term, is that the more we practice disrupting ourselves before something external asks us to do it or forces us to do it, the easier it is when it comes from outside. Because we understand that there is a dynamic to disruption. There's a pattern, there's a rhythm to it. And so by increased exposure, we reduce the fear.

Shari Simpson: I want to switch gears just a little bit because you said something that I want to kind of click into around diversity. You know, we have spent the last couple of years seeing this wave of

change as we've leaned into diversity initiatives and then pulled back and are kind of redefining what those definitions mean. So I want to ask something really specific around technology bias and how do you think about those types of integrations from a diversity of thought perspective as we move forward and all these new technologies are being introduced to us.

Elatia Abate: This is such a critical question, not only for AR, augmented reality also, but not only for HR, but for leaders across the board. AI different from other technologies that we have interacted with in the past or used as drivers for digital transformation in a more traditional sense. It learns from our interaction with it. And so by our presence or our absence, we are creating. the reality of what AI is building in conjunction with us. And so this is critically important in questions around diversity in hiring across the board, but in hiring, in promotion, in candidate definition, when we're solely looking inside the HR space. And so knowing who is programming the AI from the get-go is critically important, ensuring that you have a broad and diverse database of profiles that AI is learning from. And for guidance on this, the go-to person is, I don't know if you've heard of the Algorithmic Justice League and Dr. Joy Buolamwini, but she has done phenomenal work around first exposing the biases in the data that train and program AI, and then building initiatives and helping others ensure that everybody is coded into our future.

Shari Simpson: That is fascinating, and I can't wait to dig into what she's doing. So I really liked that, that you shared that with us. You know, as we think about the advancement of technology beyond AI, one of the concerns I have as a business leader is how does that change some of the biometric data tracking that could or could not be deployed to, quote, increase employee productivity? And I'm using that lightly because I think there are, obviously there's tools out there now like is your Teams light on? Is your mouse moving? Do we really think those are markers of productivity? Probably not, but there's still organizations that require that level of oversight to their employees. How do we need to start thinking about technology not getting in the way of our relationships?

Elatia Abate: As an executive and as a leader myself, I'm allergic to having that kind of oversight in the work that I'm doing. And a couple years ago when this technology was really disseminating in the public space, the New York Times had an interactive article, and I don't remember exactly what it was, but it was an interactive article in which they tracked you as you were reading the article and told you how much attention you were paying or if they thought you were reading for comprehension or not. It was so anxiety driving. While reading a simple newspaper article, I can't imagine what day-to-day would be like having that degree of tracking. And so I've always leaned into, and this is my personal bias, when you have A mission that's engaging and a culture that's supportive of the people who you're bringing on board. People want to work toward reducing impactful results because they're engaged, empowered, intelligent adult human beings. And so I

always think that these things exist within the context of the strategy and the results that they're driving. And is this truly helping us? drive top and bottom line and engagement and productivity in the sense of employee well-being, or is it not? And that's where I think the key questions really sit.

Shari Simpson: Have you seen yet in the organizations that you've worked with a rise of deep fake technology? And maybe not to the point where we're having people who are conducting fake interviews per se, but I have seen in my career, you know, assessment tests being taken by not your candidate, written or coding tests not being taken by your candidate, and then your candidate shows up and something doesn't match. How do we think about how deepfake and AI and technology is going to potentially be another just thing that we need to be aware of and watch for and prepare, you know, our hiring managers for?

Elatia Abate: Sure. So there are all, well, I wish there weren't, but up until now, there have always been nefarious actors or people who are not going to play the game by the rules, which is unfortunate. So having that awareness first and foremost is critical. Second, I think, you know, there are ways and ways to have human beings truly produce the work that they're doing. And this is a distinction along a selection process. For example, a lot of us have begun to, and certainly even when I was running recruiting for Anheuser-Busch InBev and for Dow Jones, those first couple of stages of a recruitment process are video recruiting. They're resumes that are being scanned by an AI tool in the background. And so, Figuring out ways to add a human touch can be critically important. And then ensuring that there's a stage gate somewhere along the middle of the process where a human being is actually connecting with a human being in person. You might have to stretch the budget a little bit and fly somebody into the home office.

Shari Simpson: It's such a good point, though. You know, everything that we're seeing from a legislation perspective is saying there's got to be human intervention. We cannot just solely rely on technology to make all these decisions for our talent. It's going to get us in trouble and we're going to be held accountable for it. So I love that you phrased it like there should be, you know, human gates, let's put it that way, in place to make sure that what you are seeing digitally is what you are getting in real life.

Elatia Abate: Yeah. And another way to do it, you know, sort of flip the the challenge on its head. And this is what I encourage my clients to do in other scenarios, particularly clients who are reticent and fearful of adopting AI as a technology and saying, why don't you use the deep fake in your recruitment process as a way to show the human being's talent? Right? So, the recruitment question could be design a deep fake that does the following things that looks like this, you know, that is an individual, you know, there are other guardrails that you would need to put in, but you use the technology to promote the very thing, the safety, the filter, and the talent recognition, we'll call it a bar if you want to, that you're really looking to drive for.

Shari Simpson: What a creative idea. You know, as we wrap up our

conversation, I want to ask you one last thing. As you think towards the future, how work is changing, not necessarily the future of work. I think work is always evolving. And so it's how do we prepare for that? there's a whole lot we could prepare for. As you think about the future, how do we stay the most current? How do we make sure we're learning the most recent skills? You gave us some tips already, but is there anything that you're kind of foreshadowing that might be coming?
Elatia Abate: Yes, so a few different things. Stay in tune on LinkedIn and just follow the hashtags for AI, artificial intelligence, AI and HR. There are a lot of smart people who love to go down rabbit holes that save us time from doing that sort of thing. So that's the first thing. But secondly, get plugged into the conferences and events that are occurring around the world. They are rampant right now, and they're rich with talent and information. I'm going to actually be in New York for Impact AI Live on July 12th this year. It's a day-long event that's dedicated specifically to generative AI in the enterprise space, in the big company workspace. So I would highly encourage you to go, but there's so many wonderful educational opportunities out in the world. Just dive in and get going is what I would say.
Shari Simpson: I love that. Well, thank you for taking a few minutes of your day to sit and talk about this very important topic.
Elatia Abate: Thank you so much for having me. It was a joy to be here.