

The future of AI in the workforce

Host: **Kyle Forrest**, Human Capital US Chief Marketing Officer, Deloitte Consulting LLP

Guests: **Brandon Roberts**, Group Vice President, People Analytics and AI, ServiceNow, Inc.

Kyle Forrest:

Hello Capital H listeners and welcome back to an episode from Gartner's ReimagineHR Conference in Orlando, Florida. I'm joined on this episode by Brandon Roberts, the Group VP of Analytics and AI for HR at ServiceNow. Brandon, thanks for joining us on Capital H.

Brandon Roberts:

Happy to be here. Good to see you, Kyle.

Kyle Forrest:

Brandon, I'd like to just start and introduce you to our listeners. So, tell us a little bit about what your career journey has looked like leading you into this role at ServiceNow.

Brandon Roberts:

Yeah, so I've spent the last 20 years or so of my career in the people analytics, predictive analytics, AI space, and I've had the joy of kind of building people analytics functions at three separate companies.

So, started at Qualcomm, a mobile technology company back when the iPhone was released. Got to experience that kind of technology revolution, and it was really my first foray into building an analytics function, which was a lot of lessons learned over those three years.

Kyle Forrest:

Yeah, I could imagine.

Brandon Roberts:

And then got the second experience at Pinterest. So, I started there when it was still a pretty small company, still a startup. Got to watch that company grow and ultimately, go public and left soon after that and joined ServiceNow. And I've been there for the last five or six years building their people analytics function. And all of it has been focused around how do we use data, analytics, AI to drive better decisions for our organizations, better decisions for HR.

And I think one of the things that you and I have talked about before, and that I think is really interesting, is AI has so many tentacles into different parts of HR, but it needs a home in HR too. And I think it's been an

interesting to watch—at least at ServiceNow, we've decided that people analytics is that space, and that it fits really nicely into there. So, a little bit about my career and what we're doing today.

Kyle Forrest:

Absolutely. Well, Brandon, thank you for that. I think what is telling about the role you have now, and that background is it emphasizes the importance of data insights and how do you make sure you're leveraging those data and insights to drive business value in the very current topic and priority for many organizations of AI and automation.

Can you, Brandon, share a little bit about what are some of ServiceNow's current priorities relative to AI and automation? I know what I've seen in the market relative to the features and functionality that's been released for customers to use, had the opportunity to see you speak twice at two separate events about the journey, but for the broader audience, just share a little bit about what are some of the current priorities for ServiceNow from an AI perspective.

Brandon Roberts:

Yeah, and I'll talk a little bit about our journey too because I think that's an important part of it. But we started same as everybody else. ChatGPT explodes on the scene and everybody's like we got to get AI use cases launched as quickly as possible, back in early 2023. So, we went through that process.

We launched our first use case as quickly as we possibly could, and we learned two things. One is that it's highly cross-functional. AI is not something you can do in a single team, you need a lot of different players.

And then the second thing we learned is the technology is really only half the battle, maybe not even half the battle. And that you need all these different components around the technology to be successful.

And so, our priorities basically boiled down to our strategy, and our strategy had kind of four pillars. And this is what we're focusing on internally at ServiceNow.

So, the first pillar is, we call it the AI operating model or creating an AI factory. It's thinking through how do you take a use case or a concept for an idea with AI and convert it into value? And I find organizations are really struggling with this one, that they're either adding way too much governance and slowing down the process so that nothing's getting done, or they're not doing any of that, and they don't have the right checks and balances to sort of make sure they're doing it in the right way.

And so we spent a lot of time, one of our first priorities was how do you design that process? How do you take the start of the idea, figure out I have to do step A, B, and C, then I need to involve legal and data privacy, then I need to involve security—and really mapping out how that works in practice is to me a really good step that a lot of organizations aren't taking right now. And it really helped us move quickly—

Kyle Forrest:

So, a little bit of go slow to go fast, so to speak. So, what Deloitte has certainly seen in some of our research with our quarterly State of GenAI and the Enterprise report has been some organizations have really been challenged to either roll AI out at scale with whatever automation capabilities that might be. Second, the adoption challenges. And then third, avoiding the broad-brush-stroke, so to speak. AI's not going to solve everything. How do you have targeted use cases?

So, what you're sharing, you all kind of went slow to go fast, put the right processes in place, clarity on which teams are going to be involved along the way... So that once that's in place, now all of a sudden, you've got this engine that can say use case identified, route it through this, use case deployed.

Brandon Roberts:

Exactly. And just to your point, we've had over 200 use cases that we've identified, only 50 of those actually got through like our initial review of our own.

So, there's a lot of great ideas out there, but there are challenges. Models may not be as accurate as you would need for this certain use case. There's lots of different components to it. But I think doing that

upfront, instead of going all the way through the process of implementing a technology and then finding out it's not delivering the ROI is another kind of key part of it and I think relates to what you were talking about.

Kyle Forrest:

Great. So, kind of point one of your four-point plan is really around that operating model, cross-functional teams for governance, et cetera. What's kind of point two on the plan?

Brandon Roberts:

Yeah—So, this is one that I think you hear a lot of people talking about, but we call it build the tech and data foundation. And that's sort of two pieces. The data foundation piece is data quality, data governance. I think those are things we've been struggling with in HR for a long time, and they just became way more important than they ever were. And it's a challenge that we're going to need to spend a lot of resourcing and time to fix.

And I think the other interesting part of this data foundation is it's no longer just the data that's in a system of record. Any policy document you're creating, anything you're creating within HR has now become data that GenAI could use for different use cases.

And so, we have to think differently about how we design that content, where we keep it, how we store it, how people find it, and really build the structure around data in a way that we haven't had to do in the past.

Kyle Forrest:

Well, Brandon, what I have heard yesterday at the day one with the Gartner HR event, someone was saying data has become such a part of the conversation. You could look last 20 years in HR, what did people talk about relative to an initiative? People, process, technology, and now it has to be people, process, technology, data.

And I think there's also a reflection that setting aside AI, but past technology challenges that companies have dealt with, you could probably look at data as one of the root causes. Because there was always a conversation, don't take your current state processes and lift and shift into new technology and just expect the uptake of

new functionality to solve a problem. I think many people are probably reflecting back over the last 20 years and saying, "Alright, when did we actually make a process change?" Leverage new technology, change role and responsibility of people, but it was bad data in, bad data out. Right? And that just gets magnified with AI right now.

Brandon Roberts:

I think that's exactly right. It just becomes increasingly important and the issues that we've had for a long time that maybe we were able to hide a little bit, that doesn't happen anymore if we really want automated solutions that use AI, the quality of that data has to be you know almost perfect, which is a real challenge.

Kyle Forrest:

Absolutely. So, second point in the plan, as you said, related to that data governance, data quality. So, point three.

Brandon Roberts:

Yeah. Actually, there's a second part to that second pillar.

Kyle Forrest:

Yeah, go for it.

Brandon Roberts:

And that's just the tech foundation. I see a lot of companies that are choosing kind of point solutions to solve a specific use case, and that might be the right answer for a lot of different companies.

But thinking through that entire ecosystem of where you're building experiences for your employees so that you're not distributing your data in a bunch of different places, a bunch of different technologies, really thinking about that architecture becomes important. You've got to have the quality data, but it also has to be in the right place to deliver the experience that you want for your employees.

So, it's easy for us, we work at ServiceNow, we use our platform for that, but every company has to make that decision. Every company has to decide where they're going to put these experiences. And I think that's a really important decision.

Kyle Forrest:

Yeah; it almost brought this image to mind of people with back in the gold rush. You're sticking your little pan in the lake, in the river, trying to shake for gold nuggets to pop out. Why would you disaggregate all your data onto all these different places and constantly be kind of sticking a report or an insight into the data stream and saying, "Am I going to get some gold?"

You know if data's the intangible gold, why don't you bring it together in an organized fashion with the right governance model that you can then point automation and AI capabilities against it to truly magnify the impact.

So, appreciate you for clarifying on that second piece of the data and tech infrastructure. So, point three in the plan that ServiceNow has been tackling for AI and HR.

Brandon Roberts:

Yeah, and that is to invest strategically. I think AI has an amazing ROI and we'll talk about use cases in a little bit, and we can talk about the ROI we're seeing with certain use cases, but it doesn't come free.

And there is this upfront investment, we just talked about the data foundation. A lot of companies haven't solved that problem so they're going to need to invest there. You also need the AI expertise to build the underlying technology or implement it if you're going out buying technology out of the box.

So, all of that doesn't come free. And I see a lot of organizations trying to say, "Oh, we're just kind of adding it to our HR tech team." It's another priority for them to figure out. And I really believe you have to take a step back and design a plan that has the right investment and hire people with that real expertise into HR. So, we've done that a couple times at ServiceNow, and I think it's been really, really effective.

Kyle Forrest:

So, the three points so far, the AI operating model governance, data and tech infrastructure, right investment, right talent. What was the point four that really unlocked it for you all?

Brandon Roberts:

And this is the most important one, and it's enablement. There is so much in terms of skills that we need to build in our organizations in order for this to be successful. And so, I think I'm probably spending the most time thinking about this problem of "how do we actually do that?"

And so, we've kind of designed this plan around kind of four pillars. We're obsessed with the number four for some reason. But we want everybody to know AI. We want everyone to understand what's a good use case. How do I identify a good use case? Every employee should have that.

Using AI. Not every employee, but most employees are going to have an AI solution that's supposed to help them do their job in the next couple of years. How do we train them to use that?

You talked about the adoption problem—we've seen this. We actually launched a technology solution that's on ServiceNow called Case Summarization. Launched it, huge ROI time savings. We measured it, it looked great, only 10% of people used it. And the reason was because they didn't understand how it worked.

So, we did training. How does it work? Eighty-five percent adoption. Just from explaining what goes into the model, how it works. And so, I think anytime you're launching a use case, don't forget about that. Think really critically about how you enable them. And I think even more importantly, put it in the workflow. If you're launching a solution on a use case on a specific technology, you should be training them right there. Short video, here's what goes in, here's how you should think about it, here's how you should use it.

And then we also have this track around building AI. So, really building the technical experts, taking people who maybe were data scientists, weren't exactly experts in AI, but building that skill for them so that we have enough resources to do everything that we want to do in the AI space.

Kyle Forrest:

I want to re-emphasize the magnitude of that jump that you just highlighted. Rolled

out a use case, 10% adoption, spent the time and energy to actually go engage with the workforce, explain it to them, help with some training, help with some change management. how do you use this in the flow of work—85% adoption.

I have to imagine there are very few examples out there from organizations where they can show us 75% jump and adoption in something where they measured and took action, and then saw that. That is an incredible story.

And I think that's an example that emphasizes what some of the research that not only Deloitte, but other organizations, you all, and many who have been looking at the AI adoption space in the last couple years have seen. You can't just launch a tool and expect workers to use it. Because what are they going to think? Some of the Gartner research highlighted on day one in the opening keynote was, there are more tools than ever out in front of workers. So, it's yet another tool with AI capabilities. When are they supposed to find the time and energy to learn it, use it, when they can just focus on, "Hey, I've done my job the same way, it's working just fine, I'm going to keep doing my thing."

So, that's a powerful example. So, thank you for sharing that. And I think that fourth point of your overall pillar, AI operating model, data and tech infrastructure, right investment with right talent, and then the enablement for the workforce. Right? And that kind of four points tied into the enablement, teaching the workforce, know how to use it, know how to build it, actually put it to use, not just know it and build it and then put it to use.

Brandon Roberts:

It's called targeted re-skilling. So, this is all the—we've done an interesting exercise where we took roles in our company, broke them down into tasks and said which of those roles is going to be impacted by AI the most over the coming years?

And when we launch a major solution that's going to impact capacity significantly for a certain group of employees, we want to think about how do we use that capacity for something important for our organization.

And I think a lot of people sort of launch a use case, they say, "Hey, we're saving 10 minutes of everybody's time for X, Y, Z." The next step is what do you do with that time? And how do you actually use it to do something that you weren't able to do in the past?

And I think a lot of people stop at that technology launch versus really saying, "Hey, how can I use the skills of the workforce that is not being used now on something that was mundane and didn't need their skills, but use it for something really important for our organization."

Kyle Forrest:

Well, and Brandon, what I like about that is many workers in this ... there's this macro narrative for some people, maybe a lot of people around anxiety or nervousness of, okay, if I start to have productivity gains show up, what is that going to do?

And so, you all are being intentional with saying, "Hey, team, this new functionality is going to impact these three of 10 tasks, therefore, here's how we're going to help you use the time that you're no longer going to spend on those three tasks doing something different." Maybe within the same role, new tasks added in, maybe a different role. However it may play itself out.

But it's putting actually a journey in front of the workers to say, you're not on this alone, the organization is here to support you through some sort of transition.

Brandon Roberts:

And so much of what we're launching is not... we haven't launched anything that's removing roles. We're removing percentages of capacity so that people can focus on different things. And so, I think organizations need to embrace that.

They need to say, "How do I upskill these employees to do something different?" Nobody that I work with is saying, "I've got plenty of hours in the day," you just don't hear it. And so, if we can create that capacity and focus on something that's more strategic, that's a win.

Kyle Forrest:

Well, Brandon, what I like with what you're saying about that being a win is I have heard someone put this analogy to say, if an organization fundamentally believes AI's only usage is to drive efficiency and cut costs, they're going to do that, right?, and you're going to see the results.

But if you believe on the, on the positive side that AI is going to unlock potential, unlock new things that humans can do, you're going to leverage AI to drive massive new avenues of growth. Which sounds like what you all are doing.

If I've got this extra time for people now, how can I redeploy those people in a way that benefits ServiceNow as an organization, the customer ecosystem—I mean, the growth that the company has been on in the last few years has been tremendous. And I would posit, it's probably partly due to this philosophy that you have.

Brandon Roberts:

I mean, it gives us this opportunity to create new revenue streams. We should be thinking about it in that way, and also gives us the opportunity as people to develop. I think it's not just about doing the tasks you've been doing over and over again. We're going to need to develop new skills to support what the organization needs.

And so, it's a great story for HR. HR has such an interesting, important role in that transformation that every organization's going to have to do.

Kyle Forrest:

So, Brandon, you've kind of taken us through the priorities of ServiceNow, the four-point plan that you all have used to govern that and kind of continue to bring all those AI use cases forward. You've talked through some of the enablement and workforce adoption and that approach.

I'm sure some organizations who are early on the journey or even in the middle of the journey, but not sure are we doing this the right way? Or thinking, where do we start? So, maybe we'll tackle two pieces. One, if you were to tell an organization, "Look, you're just looking for a place to start on the

journey with AI," what's a couple of thoughts that you would share with them?

Brandon Roberts:

And I wish there was one answer to this question. There are some components that you need to think about within your organization. So, it does depend to some extent on how much investment you have. It depends on if you've maybe bought a technology that you're implementing or are you trying to build something custom. All those sorts of components are really important.

But I was going to simplify it to what most organizations should do. The first is start with that operating model and start with identifying who in your organization needs to be involved to take a use case forward. Find a simple use case with the least amount of risk. There's lots of risk with AI use cases, especially in the HR space, but there are lots of things that are pretty low risk.

One of the ones I've heard a lot of companies start with is summarization of survey comments. There's not a ton of risk with using GenAI to summarize survey. Find something like that that's important to your organization and go after it. And going through that process is going to help you learn about each of those four points that I talked about earlier. So I think I'd start there. Find that simple use case, involve the right stakeholders, think through the process.

Kyle Forrest:

So, let's then take it one step forward, an organization has done that, and now they're like where do I even start? To your point, there's a wealth of HR use cases out there, some that are riskier than others. You shared one example here summarizing things like survey comments or maybe even summarizing cases. But what are a couple use cases that you would kind of suggest organizations focus on that are maybe not only impactful for just the HR function, but also the broader workforce?

Brandon Roberts:

So, one of the ones I am wild about is called GenAI Search, and it's on the ServiceNow platform. And the reason I love it is not because it's the bright shiny object, but

because it's measurable ROI with pretty low lift in terms of implementation.

So, the way it works is most organizations have a knowledge base with policy documents about vacation, benefits, whatever it is, they're all somewhere. Today, employees go to a portal, most likely, they search for those policy documents. What's my health care benefits? What happens?

They get a 200-page policy document that includes every variation of country, level, all the different ways that these policies vary. And what do employees do? They shut it down. I'm not going to sift through that.

Kyle Forrest:

I don't have the time and effort to read a 200-page document, I'm looking for something of five minutes or less.

Brandon Roberts:

Right—so I'm going to ping my HR business partner, which is going to take capacity away from them, or I'm going to submit a ticket that helps me find somebody to talk to. Both of those take time and money away from your organization. So, what GenAI Search does is it indexes your policy documents.

So, it says, "Hey, I already know Kyle is this level, this country, this employee type. This is the only part of this document that they need to surface," and it surfaces it up for them. And we're finding it's saving between two and seven minutes per search.

And we at ServiceNow, and every company's going to be different, but we have 10 million searches annually.

So, think about that. A couple minutes at that amount of search is a ton of value. And then you have the capacity on the backside for HR, which we saw a significant decline in cases submitted when we implemented this technology because they got their answer. They didn't have to ping somebody. And if you measure that capacity and put it into dollars, that's a \$45 million annual return for ServiceNow.

Every company's going to be different, like I said, but that's just immediate ROI sort of a simple... it's really similar to the experience you get when you go to a search engine

today, but it's for your internal employees, consumer-grade personalized for them.

Kyle Forrest:

That's incredible. I mean, the number of, I think employee worker pain points tied to just answering inquiries of some form or fashion, and the ability for that to do it without having a call, waiting for a case ticket, which might take 24 to 48 hours, might have to get routed to a vendor, the ticket might still require a call—you've cut through a tremendous amount of complexity, simplified it, personalized it.

And there's still a human should there be questions about what was surfaced. But the numbers that you've just shared shows tremendous deflection and tremendous productivity back into the workforce, and into the HR function.

Brandon Roberts:

And it doesn't even factor in the better experience. I don't believe that people actually want to ping their HR VP. They do it because they think that's the way to get the answer quickly. So, we've seen an increase in the amount of searches since we launched this feature because people are, "Oh, now I have this easy way to get an answer. I'm going to go there more often to get the information I need."

Kyle Forrest:

That also gets back to the data infrastructure that you mentioned, because now, if you think about the content of knowledge articles as data, quality data, quality knowledge articles helps continue to improve on that search. And how you then make this a sustainable thing versus a one-time effort.

Brandon Roberts:

That is it. The work is all in getting the policy documents right, the technologies there once that happens. One of the things that we did, which I thought was really helpful (if organizations are thinking about implementing this) was we just looked up the top 200 searches.

So, top 200 searches covered 95% of the total number of searches. We just made sure that content was right for those 200. And made sure they were getting the right

answer at least to start, and then we built the process around it.

Kyle Forrest:

That's incredible. We actually at one of the sessions at Gartner, our Deloitte team was talking about the math of a discreet one-off investment (so, focusing on those top 200) plus a sustainable practice... now you focus, you learn... equals the valued realization.

So, this is a prime example of you made a discreet effort around the top 200. You've put the model in place to sustain keeping the content and knowledge articles fresh tied to those top 200. And you can then evolve from there to tackle the other 5% as needed. Unlocked tremendous value for you all.

Brandon Roberts:

Yeah, I think that's a great way to think about it.

Kyle Forrest:

Well, Brandon, I want to just say thank you for joining us here on the Capital H Podcast at Gartner Reimagine. I really hope to all the listeners that you take away a few actionable things.

Brandon covered the four-point plan that ServiceNow has relative to their AI journey. AI operating model, data and tech infrastructure, right investment and right talent, and then enablement for the workforce.

Brandon shared a perspective on where you can start understanding every journey, every organization's going to be at a different place, and some use cases to tackle that are going to be beneficial for the workforce and for the HR function.

So, Brandon, really appreciate you taking some of this kind of theory and things that are out there in the ecosystem and bringing it to life with the ServiceNow journey. It's truly been a pleasure, and hearing the story across the year that you and the organization have been on, I imagine there's going to be tremendous things ahead in 2025 that we'll continue to monitor along the way.

Brandon Roberts:

Yeah, it was fun.

Kyle Forrest:

Awesome. Thank you. And stay tuned for more insights coming from the Gartner ReimagineHR conference. Thanks all.

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