



For Cloud Professionals, part of the On Cloud Podcast

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Title: Building the future of work with data, ML, and empathy

Description: Post-pandemic, savvy companies are applying the lessons they learned from it—especially vis-à-vis their workforce. In this podcast, David Linthicum talks with Workday's Greg Pryor about how companies can use data and machine learning technology to improve their employees' experience. They also discuss the future of work. The upshot? Employees will need to ramp up their social agility and build strong connections, and leaders will need to develop empathy as a primary management skill.

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Operator:

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David Linthicum:

Welcome back to the On Cloud podcast, your one place to find out how to make cloud computing work for your enterprise. This is an objective discussion with industry thought leaders who provide their own unique perspective around the pragmatic use of cloud-based technology. Today on the show, we are joined by Greg Pryor. Greg is an executive director at Workday, where he's applied his experience leveraging Workday's cloud HCM, human capital

management, technology to optimize the company's internal talent management practice and how it helps customers address today's most pressing people issues. Greg is the curator of Workday's CHRO Connect—he's going to have to tell me about that in a minute—a community of forward-looking change makers and a contributor to *Forbes* HR Council, as am I. Join Greg in that. And, also, his work has been featured in the *Wall Street Journal*, *Fortune*, and *MIT Sloan Management Review*. No slouch there, Greg. How're you doing?

Greg Pryor:

I am very good. Thanks so much for having me. I'm a big fan of the podcast, so I'm excited to be here. Thanks so much.

David Linthicum:

Well, the podcast is built on people like yourself who are willing to come on and share some of their experiences, and really kind of the pragmatic use of the technology. So, what we talk about here is the truth of it all. In other words, how to make it work, where the value of stuff is coming from, things like that. And your experience just kind of goes right into that. So, tell me about CHRO Connect.

Greg Pryor:

Yeah. Thanks for asking. So, we—maybe it's just a little context for my role as well, and then—and how that sort of led us up to my role as curator for CHRO Connect. I've been at Workday for about seven years, really in doing three things. First and foremost, as a practitioner. I'm a 30-year-plus practitioner in the human capital space, and I had the privilege to sort of help Workday grow as head of talent during our big growth spurt. I spend a lot of time with our customers. There's a well-known analyst who refers to me as a pollinating bee across the Workday community, sort of understanding what's happening and sharing some of the things that we're doing. And then I have the incredible privilege to spend lots of time with folks like yourself in the academic space as well, thought leaders like John Boudreau at USC, or Rob Cross at Babson, Amy Edmondson at Harvard, and, so, I sort of swirl those things together, and I had been sharing what I believed were five of the most pressing people imperatives with our customers and with audiences like yours today.

And then when the pandemic hit, obviously we all moved off-road. We all operated—began to operate in a space where we had no playbook for what was happening, and, so, we thought it was important, as many other organizations and you all have done, is to get a group of really forward-looking folks together and to really talk about what were they experiencing, to give folks as much insight as quickly as possible. And, so, we've actually this year been pursuing what we call the IDEAS for a changing world, and IDEAS is an acronym for those five pressing people imperatives. The first is inclusion and belonging. The second is digital acceleration. The third is enabling experiences. The fourth is the agile organization, and the fifth is the skills imperative. So, these are sort of five really pressing topics that we believe the pandemic has accelerated and amplified, and, so, we're just bringing what I think are some of the coolest folks together who have perspectives on this to help share with this community what's going on and what we can do to adapt and thrive in today's world.

David Linthicum:

I think that's excellent. One of the things I noticed when the pandemic hit and now that it's coming to a slow end, ultimately, we have companies out there that are kind of companies that can and companies that can't. Companies that can cross digital divide and get their digital enablement set in place and the ability to automate interaction with customers, enhance the customer experience, provide a better product, and operate in a more optimized way, versus companies that can't, where they haven't really crossed the digital divide. They haven't really figured out the technologies that they need to leverage to make themselves successful, not only now, but moving forward.

The potential of becoming disrupted by, by the way, companies that can. So, it's funny, I wrote an article a few years back called, "The Brandpocalypse." We talked about companies that are leveraging technology as a force multiplier to enhance and delight their markets and get into a best customer experience, and companies that typically are missing the boat on that. And now that we have a remote workforce, we're changing the game. How do companies that probably can't right now become companies that can?

Greg Pryor:

Yeah, well, and first of all, I think this is one of the most pressing challenges and opportunities in front of us as well. When the pandemic first hit, I was connecting with a bunch of CHROs in South Africa, and one of them shared a sort of phrase that has become pretty famous since then, which is this idea we were all in a similar storm, but candidly in very different boats. And I do think, as I look back on that conversation, as I look back over the last 18 or so months, I think that we will probably look back and refer to what I sort of think about as the COVID chasm, exactly as you said. Those folks who were in digital speedboats, who were able to be more agile, who were able to really pivot on a dime, and then there were perhaps those organizations who were in giant boats that couldn't pivot.

And while I still think there is opportunity, and obviously we're seeing a huge investment in digital acceleration, I do believe, to your point, that people who had a more digital mindset, who were thinking about how to digitize their experience, who were invested in data have gotten a really pretty significant head start on where the world is absolutely going. So, I do think we still will experience, again, this idea of a COVID chasm, those that were able to ride the wave ahead of time. They had their surfboard, they were paddling, they grabbed the crest of the wave, and then those who perhaps had their board pointed the wrong way. I live not too far from the ocean, so I apologize for the surfing metaphors. I was out for a walk on the beach this morning. But I think this is going to be a really significant challenge, and I do believe, ironically, it will be even more impactful to folks in human capital or HR space, which is where we'll see some of the most dramatic change in this space, I believe.

David Linthicum:

So, how can HR departments learn to leverage automation to kind of take the company to the next level in terms of crossing the digital divide?

Greg Pryor:

Yeah, I think the most important thing is to really have this digital mindset, a digital first mindset. We had—one of the CHRO Connect shows we did recently had a very prominent technologist, who I'm a big fan of, and what he shared very clearly was that data-driven decision capability is the new competitive advantage. We've clearly left sort of the connected economy, while that's true, into this sort of digital, and I really believe, and I know it's the essence of your podcast and the good work you're doing. Those who have the data to make predictions, we're big fans—I'm personally a big friend and fan of Ajay Agrawal at the University of Toronto, wrote the book *Prediction Machines*. Love the book *Prediction Machines*.

If folks listening today have not read that, I don't know if I'm allowed to make a plug, but I would strongly make a plug. And interesting enough, Ajay is an economist, and he really talks about the economic disruption of when you're able to make predictions. So, I think in today's HR world specifically, how we think about predicting, if you will, using the underlying data, using machine learning to predict what learning program that's going to be most helpful to me, to help me predict a mentor or a connection, to help me understand maybe where our workforce is having a challenge related to wellness.

And ultimately, I think the long-term game here is to actually curate work to people based on their capabilities and connections who are most likely interested, motivated, and able to actually do that work. So, this use of data, thinking about data as this incredible asset, and then being able to really almost think about HR as a prediction machine as the cost of those predictions, the cost of machine learning, continues to come down, where would you apply that in the human capital space to have a competitive advantage, so that the end of the day we're automating, we're augmenting so that we can elevate essential human capabilities. And I really think, to your point, I think that's going to become the dividing line. Those organizations who are leaning into data, who are leaning into technology, who are automating and augmenting so that they can elevate human capability to go solve the much, much bigger and essential human challenges that lie in front of us.

David Linthicum:

Moving forward, we're leveraging technology as a force multiplier to get closer in that space, machine learning, the ability to leverage cloud technology, big data, edge computing, you name it, as a way to kind of get there. So, what are the mechanisms that enterprises should be looking at right now, now that they're coming out of the pandemic and they're looking to decrease their digital divide?

Greg Pryor:

Yeah, I think first and foremost, again I'll apologize for being a broken record on it, it's the data, and it will be about the data. You have to—I think perhaps at least in my experience, HR professionals don't really think as thoughtfully about the data that they have and how they can use that data. There's a huge amount of availability. Obviously, I'm a Workday fan. Workday gives us an enormous amount of data to understand employee sentiment, to understand employees' experiences, their skills, their interests, and, so, first and foremost, I think how do we use that data to make predictions to apply those to practices and programs that will accelerate our business.

And, so, I think first of all, thinking about that data. And then second, I believe really being thoughtful about this idea of a series of intentions. What are the outcomes that you're trying to achieve as an organization? What are those things that are driving business competitiveness, and really be clear-minded? So, maybe that's the business is transitioning. I was with one of our customers recently who's doing a major transition, and they're really thinking about the skills that they need to ultimately fill this transition. And, so, using, as an example, skills data to understand skill flow as an example. We at Workday actually measure on a daily basis the way skills are flowing through our organization based on acquisition, based on growth, and based on retention.

And we're able to see those critical skills in the context of our business capability and our business strategy and be able to monitor that and put in place strategies to enhance it. So, those would be maybe two examples that could feel slightly extreme, and maybe where most organizations aren't yet, but at least from where I sit, that's where the puck is going, and I do really believe we need to skate to that puck. And then the technology which is already in place will let us make that prediction, will tell us, "Hey, this is a skill that we're at risk for losing based on the following trends. It's central to our business success and we need to do something right now to either grow, acquire, bot, build, or borrow that skill." I think that's where we're going in this digital context.

David Linthicum:

I think we're rather lucky at Deloitte because when the pandemic hit, we already had a distributed workforce and knew how to be distributed, had VPN lines and things like that. But there are traditional companies out there that are now distributed, and they're going to remain so. They found that, actually, productivity went up, and of course cost of real estate went down since people didn't have to go to work every day. Lower carbon footprints since people aren't driving every day. Lots of good things happened which was kind of a silver lining of all this, but the way you're going to manage that human capital in that kind of environment is going to be pretty different. So, what's the current thinking at Workday and in your head as to how things are going to change in the next few years?

Greg Pryor:

Yeah, I—and candidly, I'm excited about this acceleration and the opportunities. The opportunities for more of a hybrid environment to give people maybe a little bit more choice, a little bit more flexibility, helps keep the tread on the tires for them and actually maybe even help us save the planet a little bit more.

I would say one of the key things we're looking at and I think organizations need to look at is what I would call social agility. As we see more technology, machines working with humans, I think we'll see an increased pressure on the collaborative intensity of work relative to a hybrid work environment. I think just in general we see—we know we've seen the increase in the collaborative intensity of work. And, so, my experience will be, as we're more sort of decentralized, distributed, and working in digital context, this idea of social agility, our ability to make trusted connections, the ability to understand in the organization where the experts and influences are, the ability to have a network that challenges you on the work that you're doing.

We, actually going into the pandemic, interestingly enough, because we have been measuring our employee sentiment and our employee experience for many years—we actually knew that the experience of our remote workforce, those folks not in our offices, was actually slightly better than the experience of folks in offices. Obviously that was not going to change a work-from-home order, but I believe that those folks actually enhanced this skill of social agility. They knew how to connect, such as the Deloitte workforce. I have to believe, having spent ten years in consulting myself, that the nature of your work that quickly builds trusted connections, to understand networks, gives you an advantage in a more distributed world. So, I think one of the new personal and organizational capabilities that we need to build is this topic of social agility, our ability to produce productive connections more quickly in a more agile world.

David Linthicum:

And monitoring the health and wellbeing and productivity of employees and doing so in a way which is going to have a positive notion. That seems to be something that we didn't understand as well as we should have, I think, before coming into the pandemic, and now we had the ability to deal with social issues, people who were relocating, kid balance-work life, all these sorts of things which really have been kind of decoupled from dealing with human

capital in a traditional enterprise. I know you folks at Workday have a little more innovative thinking around that sort of thing. But really is kind of bringing a lot of these companies into the 20th century in terms of leveraging resources as they should be leveraged, these valuable resources that are very fragile that need to be understood, need to be cultivated, and there needs to be a bidirectional communication in-between the employees, the human capital, and the enterprise. Because if there's not, we're just throwing tasks at people, things like that, and expecting results to come back and just measuring the results to kind of measure success. We're not really going to get at the issue of it, are we?

Greg Pryor:

Well, I think to your point, and it goes back to your opening sort of digital divide comments, those folks who had listening mechanisms that were more frequent, that could understand, were able to understand, to your point, the wellness of their environment, what was happening for people. You know, again, maybe overusing this same storm-different boat analogy, we know that our caregivers were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. We know that in general we saw the largest exodus of women in the workforce in the United States that we've seen perhaps ever, our underrepresented populations, those folks who were—while folks like myself were able to cocoon at home, there were lots of amazing healthcare workers—my daughter is a healthcare worker who is moving to the front line—our grocery workers, our supply chain workers.

And, so, I think, to your point, we continue to see this—the importance of empathizing with different populations, and we saw a dramatic increase. I mentioned our good friend, Erica Volini, who's at Deloitte and leads your human capital practice, one of the smartest and nicest people I know. I'm a big, big fan of hers. But she shared, and you all shared, quite a bit of really interesting work coming out of the pandemic, the importance of humanity, the importance of empathy, the research I read and we experience at Workday showed that when your leader had greater empathy through the pandemic, you saw it, to your point, productivity and experience actually improve. And, so, it put pressure on a new set of skills. It will continue to put pressure, I think, on a new set of skills that were always important but now have really become super important, and we have to help our people leaders and our organizational leaders and our HR professionals really recalibrate those skills that matter in sort of this new world of work.

David Linthicum:

So, in the new world of work, we're collapsing the organization. They're no longer as autocratic and tall as they used to be. I remember working for a big Fortune 5 company, actually, and just having that org chart everywhere, and everybody was really kind of dependent on where they exist on the org chart and moving up the org chart. Now there are no org charts that I see in many instances and people kind of organizing around tasks in a much more meaningful and, I think, productive way. But, therefore, it's probably easy for them to get lost, since you're going to have multiple reporting relationships, multiple teams that you're working on and multiple products you're working on, things like that. How does Workday and other cloud-based technologies that are dealing with human capital management kind of account for that? I guess workforce complexity is what we're talking about.

Greg Pryor:

Yeah, and I do think, to your point, I mean, I do think that, while there will probably always be some place in our organizations for the hierarchy to do certain things, what we now know, to your point, is that all of us, especially sort of post-pandemic, are operating more like the Deloitte's of the world where we move to the work, where there is sort of this democratization of work and people, we curate the work to those people who have the most interest, they're going to build capability, and, so, I do think the new world is much more networked. We see that work travels to people based on their reputation within the network, and, so, to your point, I think this—that gets me a little bit back to that point of social agility, being more intentional about how we make those connections.

I really—I worry about, as an example, the millions of employees who started, either in new roles, or new jobs, or in new companies during the pandemic. Hopefully there were organizations—I know we were very intentional at Workday about doing our best to get those folks connected, to help them feel a sense of energy and our purpose, to deepen the sense of belonging, all of the things that we know are absolutely critical to success in the organization. But I do think that that's going to be a new capability of how do we operate in these networked worlds. The other maybe just quick thing I'd mention is a bit of a consequence or a consideration. I mentioned up front my good friend and colleague, Rob Cross at Babson, who's one of the sort of pioneers in the application of social-network science, and he's got a bunch of new work coming out based on his original work on collaborative overload. I do think we're seeing this incredible spike in collaborative overload right now that, while for most people productivity has gone up—and I'm so grateful to the global workforce for keeping the world growing.

We definitely are seeing folks suffering from collaborative overload, and that's adding to a wellness epidemic that we already were in. So, I think there are some exciting things about working in a networked world, and then I do think we need to be really sensitive to the unintended consequences of people not feeling connected, or being overconnected in this new world of work, and I think candidly, we're just learning these lessons as this new way of working has been accelerated.

David Linthicum:

You mentioned before the show when we were just talking, working with educational institutes. I also volunteer with educational institutes as well around the growth of cloud-based coursework and curriculum and those particular programs. What are you working on right now?

Greg Pryor:

Yeah, I mean, I'll tell you in the broad space, and I know that you had our good friends at Telstra on one of your previous podcasts, Julian Clarke and others, and I'm a big fan, as an example, of the work the way they're thinking about, as an organization, working with the government and with other institutions to really democratize these opportunities. I do think that we'll see a general trend in learning and the flow of work. It's something that we at Workday have been very focused on, so again, using that data to say how might I curate a particular journey that's highly relevant to someone? How might I curate a piece of learning that will surprise and delight them as they say, “Yeah, that is a skill that I know I've been hoping to build? I appreciate the opportunity to either get that piece of learning or to connect with that mentor.”

So, I would imagine, at least from where I sit and the things that I see is we're continuing to see sort of learning break down into smaller pieces to be curated in the flow of work, ideally seeing artificial intelligence or machine learning doing more and more of that. And my hope is that that will ultimately allow us to sort of democratize opportunities to make things available to people in ways where, perhaps in the old world of work it was more who you knew than what you knew.

I'm a glass-half-full person. I'm optimistic that we have the opportunity to move to a world of where it's what we know and who we know that gives us availability and access to opportunities. So, no doubt, the world of learning is exploding in the most exciting ways, and I'm just really personally thrilled that where maybe a topic that was a little ho-hum five or ten years ago is now on the top of the list, both to address the skills imperative, to democratize opportunities for folks, but also just to deal in this new world of work. So, I think it's an exciting day in the learning space.

David Linthicum:

Yeah, well said. Last question. You mentioned a book that we should probably go out and read. I actually wrote it down, but what other areas—where do you get your information from on a weekly, daily, monthly basis? What books do you read? What books would you recommend our audience read to get more adept not only on cloud computing but also on kind of the notion of modern digital enablement as it relates to HCM?

Greg Pryor:

Yeah, oh gosh. I will tell you, at least for me, I am a sort of voracious consumer of information, especially where the world is changing so quickly. Honestly, I am a huge fan of podcasts over books. I will personally use podcasts to scan lots of information, which again is one of the reasons I love your podcast. So, I am a big—I've got a big, long list of various podcasts that I just enjoy looking at—enjoy listening. I used to enjoy it more when I was commuting. It was the way I would use my commuting time, but I'm a big fan of that's a way to grab information. I think a couple of books specifically that I might recommend, my friend, John Boudreau's book on really thinking about the reimagining of jobs and work.

I think John is onto something really important in this space. Rob Cross has a new book called *Collaborative Overload*, or *Beyond Collaborative Overload* coming out, which I think is going to be really essential for folks, again, big—the book *Prediction Machines*. And as geeky as this is going to sound, and I apologize, I love the Deloitte Annual Human Capital Trends Report. I know I embarrass our friend, Erica Volini, but that for me is an incredible wealth of information on what's going on. So, I think reading the trend reports is important, listening to podcasts, and then what I do is pick up a key idea from those podcasts, and then I'll double-click into those books and learn more.

David Linthicum:

Yeah, we have the same learning pattern as well. I do read a few blogs and get my Google alerts, but primarily I have a list of podcasts that I listen to when riding on the bike or running on the treadmill, and I find that's more effective in learning moving forward, and also Audio.com. I listen to audiobooks all the time, and that's helpful as well, even mostly nonfiction. So, if you enjoyed the podcast, make sure to like and subscribe on iTunes or wherever you get your podcasts. Also don't forget to rate us. Also check out our past episodes, including the On Cloud podcast hosted by my good friend, Mike Kavis, and his show "Architecting the Cloud." If you'd like to learn more about Deloitte's cloud capabilities, check out deloittecloudpodcast.com, and if you'd like to contact me directly, you can reach me at dlinthicum@deloitte.com. So, until next time, best of luck with your cloud projects. Everybody stay safe. Have a good summer.

Operator:

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