

Episode #94 A New Hope: Remote Work : Alexis Hultine

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Introduction: You're listening to workplace perspective and employment law podcast raising the bar at workplaces everywhere. Workplace perspective is a regular podcast series for employers and employees focusing on education, training, and the law to help organizations of all sizes develop and maintain successful workplace relationships.

The opinions expressed by guests on workplace perspective are their own and should not be considered legal advice. And now, here's your host, Teresa McQueen.

Host: Thank you, James. And welcome everyone to workplace perspective where we are striving to raise the bar at workplaces everywhere. Today we're talking with about flexible workplace practices with expert Alexis Hultine. Alexis helps employers develop and implement digital transformation and hybrid workplace strategies. Today, she's sharing her expertise with us to help employers and employees find connection and belonging in the remote hybrid workspace. Workspace is going to be a great show. Stay with us. We'll be right back.

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Host: Welcome back to our listeners and welcome to workplace perspective Alexis Hultine.

Guest: Oh, thank you, it's a pleasure to be here. I'm excited to talk with you. I am too.

Host: I'm so excited for this topic. But before we get started, I wanted to tell our listeners a little bit about you and what you do.

Guest: Yeah. Well, I enable flexible work. I work with companies to help employees basically be more productive and happy. And I have done this for many years. I actually prior to my founding my company digital by design. I worked at Deloitte, and I led their digital workplace COE for a 130,000 employees, and that was helping Deloitte transition to all virtual and then to hybrid. Before that, I advise the chief transformation officer on how to move all of the collaboration tools to the cloud, and then before that, I was in client service for about 14 years. Serving all sorts of clients spending a lot of time on the road, helping through digital transformation projects.

Host: That's great. Well, you are certainly the person that we want to be talking to you. This is such an important topic right now. I titled this show a new hope. Currently, because the day we had our pre call show, it was May the fourth, so may the fourth be with you. And partly, because I was feeling a bit hopeless, which is really unusual for me. About the future of remote hybrid work, it just seemed that so many of our largest employers are sort of just disregarding the positive aspects, all the data that we've discovered that shows how encouraging it is that remote hybrid work is actually working productivity is good. Work life balance is great. So, I was looking for a little hope.

Guest: Well, you know, I think that this is going to be a good show because I'm very optimistic about the future. I think that there's some employers who may take them longer to get there and arrive at the conclusion that distributed flexible remote models are good. But I'll tell you the talent market is so competitive right now that if companies aren't listening, they're going to be listening when they don't get people accepting their job offers or I've even been talking with clients

who have been expressing dismay that they get at someone on the line and they're talking and then they get the question, what's your flexible work policy? And when they can't either articulate it well or they don't have one at all, people are like, thank you very much. Goodbye. And I saw this stat that in February on LinkedIn, there the remote jobs that were posted received 50% of all the job applications. And they represented only 20% of the postings on LinkedIn that month. That number just blew me away because this is just showing that people want employers to be more flexible and trust them. So, I don't know. Again, flexible work may not be for every industry for every particular job role I recognize that. But I think that we've just been through two years where we can prove that we can do a lot and we can cut out the commute and just that alone is pretty amazing for a lot of people.

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Host: How absolutely. There's a couple of things there. I think that what my hope is kind of yours as well. And I am very hopeful typically. Just caught an off day. But I do think that my hope is that that trend continues, that the idea that, well, you may be the big employer. You may be the place to work. But what the past two years have shown me is that I need more than that. That's not the end all be all that it was before. And I'm hoping that continues to drive that. Because I do think it's important. And like you said, I think it's a great, it's a great recruiting tool. That sort of levels the playing field.

Guest: Yeah. Absolutely. And you now start seeing it on, if you go to large employer career pages, it's one of the bullet points around, we offer paid time off, good health benefits and flexible work. It's one of those bullets there that people are expecting.

Host: I agree. And I think I am so hopeful that that trend is going to continue. Because I think it's important to people. And I do think that

part of the resistance, at least in my opinion, and I want to know what you think. Is this idea that, yeah, it's great. We've done remote work. But what about the challenges? I hear this all the time. Yeah, it's great. But, you know, I missed that water cooler conversation. I missed that spontaneity, creativity that happens when we're all together. And I think a lot of large companies a lot of small companies are using that as a reason to reject either a hybrid or a remote work model, but I think it's more because you can address those issues, you just have to change your way of thinking. I mean, you have to change. You can't, you can not the idea that, oh, Sally and Bob, they're here every day. Those are the ones that really dedicated and that site out of mind sort of thing. What do you seeing? What do you think?

Guest: Yes. I mean, I call it reimagination of work. What we're looking at is just a totally different way of working. And some of these, some of these executives who are thinking this way are not being empathetic with their employees. They may be the ones and I heard of these stories where they went even in the heart of the pandemic when we were all in lockdown or maybe right after, but we're all staying at home and they're still driving to the office and taking the elevator to the 12th floor and then going into their private area and they're working all day from their office. So I think you see folks like that who are just they knew how to be successful. They have a recipe that works for them and that's the recipe that they want to keep going with. And instead of kind of sitting back and thinking, wow, this change is going to be hard, but I see so many opportunities. And frankly, a competitive advantage for people who are early adopters to attract and retain stellar talent. I think that it is a mindset shift and that not all people are ready for it. Again, you know, back to, well, talent may make you ready for it. But you do have to start thinking about basically everything. I mean, you can't rely on all of those in person interactions and things like you used

to go into the office and see your neighbor or your cubicle neighborhood balloons. And so, you could wish them a happy birthday. You don't have those visual cues to just kind of easily build relationships, celebrate with your colleagues, things like that. So, one of the things that remote and hybrid teams have to do is just be more intentional about their relationships. Whereas I think when you were co-located, you just kind of saw the birthday balloons, or you ended up eating in the lunch room together. And so particularly around relationships and networking, it just requires some new muscles. And people need to think about that differently. And hopefully we can talk a little bit more about that. I've got some great tips that we can go into. I personally also have worked remotely primarily remotely for 7 years. And I joke that I have deep, meaningful relationships with folks who I can have a healthy discord with, and I know that they've got my back, but I have no idea how tall they actually are.

Host: It's true.

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Host: Or that they're actually three dimensional, you know? That's really true. Well, I think what you're saying is really, from a decision-making perspective, because that's really what we're what we're up against, right? Decision maker ideals is that they really need to sort of see beyond themselves in their own fears in this space in this change. And think about the possibilities. And I also, I also think that I want to make clear. You're not because I hear this a lot too. You're not advocating that this is for everyone. This should be standard across the board. Because like you said, for some businesses, it doesn't work for some people. It doesn't work. And people do want to be in the office, not necessarily because they're, as you explained, that's their style. That's the way they're doing. That's fine. But there's other reasoning is

too many distractions at home or they don't have space at home to work. Lots of companies are willing to make and have made our organization did. We've had people during the pandemic who just didn't have workspace. So, we accommodated, and they came into the office, and it works. So, you're not advocating something standard, you're saying, let's talk about your workspace. And what that might work, right?

Guest: Yeah, and absolutely. And the discussion is really around for the people that have elected to be remote or work in some sort of remote slash in office model. What are the things that you need to work on that you need to think about, take ownership? I think there's the level of, as an employer, how do you facilitate some of the help support and foster and facilitate some of the things that people are going to come up against. And then help people re skill. And then as an employee, how do you take ownership of some of this and really kind of change some of your behaviors too? So, I think there's two aspects of it to people exactly what you said, who have decided that this is gives them better work but life balance or there's some sort of benefit that outweighs them being in the office a 100% of the time.

Host: Absolutely. All right, well, we're going to have to take a quick break and we come back. I want to hear some of those practical tips. Stay with us. We'll be right back.

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Host: We are talking with flexible workplace practices, expert Alexis Hultine about the challenges and benefits of remote work. Before the break, Alexis, you had talked about being more intentional. I want to hear more about that. Tell me your thoughts about being more intentional when it comes to this hybrid remote work that go workspace.

Guest: Yeah, and I think we had talked about there's kind of two types of support that you need in order to have that space to be intentional. And it's from your organization or your company that you, the recognizing that maybe while you were in the office, I'll co-located someone wasn't clocking you as you logged a minute or two at the water cooler. But they're giving you back that time and allowing you to work that into your schedule and maybe block your calendar or do something like that, schedule one on ones. So, they're recognizing that you need time to build relationships. And then I think as kind of helping train the managers on the team, how to facilitate intentionality, especially among team members. One of the things that I often end up talking with clients about is building a team, a team working agreement. And there's many different components to this, but just imagine a canvas. And if you're all remote, maybe you're using a whiteboarding product like mural or Miro or Microsoft whiteboard and doing kind of the virtual stickies. But there's different parts of this team level agreement where the manager will lead the team through. And I think it's a co creation activity of setting your team values as a team you value, maybe setting aside the first couple of minutes of your regular team calls to go around and say how your weekend was. Are you value relationships, you value celebrations, things like that. Among other things, focusing right now on the relationships aspect of it. Things like schedules and working norms, when are the core collaboration hours?

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Guest: I work often with folks all over the world, especially being on the West Coast, working with east coast three hours doesn't seem like a big deal until you get an invite for 5 a.m. What are those core collaboration hours where you can connect with your team? And then communications again when we're thinking about really building a digital workplace and being more intentional, just like we were really intentional about designing our physical office, what's our digital office look like, where we are going to connect and celebrate and things like that. So those are all, I consider those really foundational understandings to build with the team. So that you set the stage for building healthy great relationships and feeling a sense of camaraderie with your team members and connection. Then I've got like a whole list of things that I personally have practiced, and we'll share with listeners because they've worked well for me. I think there's kind of this special event category. How do you and again, this is something that you want to talk about with your team on like, let's recognize how we want to do this. Let's not just kind of scramble at the last minute. How do we want to celebrate special events, birthdays, weddings, baby showers, things like that. And there's a lot of different methods that are out there. I love a product called kudo board. And that's where everyone can go and just write a little message, attach a little video, attach photos, and just congratulate people on a birthday on all of those types of special events. And it takes a moment for the team. It's like passing around the virtual card for everyone to sign. But with some more fun visuals. I also like paperless posts. It's kind of a more formal one on one way of sending a card that feels special. And we've also had great success with tasting events. And there's a cheese monger that's based in Detroit and they will ship a box of chocolate or cheese. To everyone's door, you jump on the you jump on the Zoom link for an hour and they walk you

through tastings that you do together and they keep it short, you know, 20, maybe 30 minutes while everyone's going through their cheese or their chocolate. And then they say thank you very much and they drop and give you 20 or 30 minutes to chit chat with your colleagues and just feel something special. I don't know, there's just something very exciting about cheese arriving at your front door.

Host: I love that. You know, it's interesting. And I like the idea of keeping that going because I think a lot of during the pandemic, a lot of companies did those sorts of things. My company did a cooking class. Which was super fun. But I do think on that was everybody in the company. They did it for over three days. You signed up for a particular day. It was a lovely event. But I like the team aspect because I think that was a great way of keeping everybody in the company connected with everybody or meet new people or whatever it might be. But on your team, I think that's really important. And something super fun that people can do all together. And it is fun to get that stuff at your door and it's fair that unique experience with everybody. That's really cool. You said, what's a paperless post?

Guest: It's just basically an E card, but you get to choose the envelope and the wrapper and the stamp and things like that. And so that's just like an E card.

Host: Yeah, very cool. Very cool. So, what else? You got great tips. What else you got?

Guest: I have more. Another thing that people don't do enough when they're remote is promote good work. And there's really great tools out there to, again, celebrate the wrap of a really grueling project. Or stellar customer service, just the list goes on and on. And we have tools in our digital workplace now that help us do that. For example, on teams, there's a praise feature. And someone can easily on the team channel

or a company channel, pick the praise badge, and it's like a unicorn jumping over a rainbow or things like that. Those may be a little cheesy, but I'll tell you that just someone taking a moment to send that across and recognize someone else and promote their good work in front of a larger group. It feels good. It feels really good. So on teams, there's a praise feature on slack. There's add on apps like donut. That do similar things.

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Guest: And you know what? There's also a good old fashioned at the beginning of a team call. Just spend a moment and give a shout out. And those types of things that, again, used to just kind of come naturally when everyone was co-located. You really need to take a moment and celebrate. So those are some more ideas on sort of the kind of special events category.

Host: Don't you think that once you start doing these things, that will become the new norm? You work that muscle, it becomes more natural, do you find that that people sort of get in the groove of that and it becomes more natural?

Guest: Yeah, I do. And you are always going to have a few people who are like a 100% into it right away. And a few people who are like, okay, now I've seen more people doing it. And then you'll have a few people who maybe choose to participate a lot less. And that's okay. That same with the office parties too, right? You never got a 100% attendance for all three hours that it was going on. And that's okay. So yes, I think that as people start building these new muscles that some of these things will come a little bit more naturally, but I also think that, again, when you're working through your team agreements, laying that out, that these are all methods that are team uses. To celebrate and promote good work, is helpful. And I think that there's also something to be said

of scheduled one on one. So, we talked about, how do you connect with your team? And build rapport with them. But there's also an element of how do you build your network outside of your team. And something that I did was schedule one on ones. And I'm not talking about I know everyone's like another meeting. This is maybe depending on who it is, maybe two times a year, maybe every quarter or something like that. Someone that you recognize, oh man, I see them in a lot of cross functional meetings. I should really get to know them or they seem like an interesting person or we started together. You know, just something that signals to you that I should connect with them. And almost everyone is like, absolutely. Let's schedule something standing. And so instead of doing it one by one, you've got to go and your calendar and set the four times a year. Every three months or every four months, however you want to do it. And then you just get on the phone and actually the best way to have these types of connections so that they feel organic is to take a walk. Now I live in Portland, Oregon, so it's raining a lot of the time. That's not always possible, but get away from the desk, make sure I personally don't think this is a video on type of situation that you need to have. It's just casual conversation, learning about the individuals and maybe some projects that they're working on. And those types of networking intentional networking have really served me well over the years.

Host: I think that's great. Well, I'm getting the rapid up signal, but I want to know as we wrap up today's show. You've given some great tips; do you have any words of wisdom or any thoughts for the future that you'd like to share with our listeners before we sign up?

Guest: Yes. Hope. You know what? Yay. Hybrid work is here to stay. And we have an exciting opportunity to rethink the way that we work. My recommendation is to start with those awkward pain points around things like we talked about today. Connection and relationship building.

And iterate towards something better. And this is a journey. We are in our teenage years. But if we do this right and we really experiment and iterate, we will arrive with a more productive workforce and for sure happier employees.

Host: I think so too. Thank you so much, Alexis, for being with us today. You've given me back a little bit more hope and I appreciate that as well. And I hope the same for our listeners. Thank you so much for sharing your expertise with us today. Thank you for having me here. You can learn more about Alexis by visiting digitalbydesign.work. You can also connect with Alexis via our website at workplaceperspective.com. I want to also thank our listeners, my radio angels, James and the name at night, and workplace perspectives, team extraordinaire, our engineer producer Paul Roberts, our associate producer Melissa DeLacey. With music provided by the very talented Steven Verceloni. Thank you all for joining us. I'm workplace perspective and until next time, keep raising the bar.