

How a Pandemic Changes Employee Engagement (And What Stays the Same)

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Jamie Hoobanoff:

This is going to be a forever shift towards companies realizing and understanding that a people-first mentality is the only way forward.

Lisa Bragg:

Jamie Hoobanoff is used to industry disruption. Her recruitment agency, The Leadership Agency, focuses exclusively on start-ups and is designed to support those industry disruptors. The COVID-19 is disrupting everything, including the world of recruitment. I'm Lisa Bragg, and this is Bold(h)er, stories of and for women who stand out, brought to you by BMO for Women. Jamie, you studied marketing, but you ended up entering the workforce and building your career in recruitment. Tell me how that came about.

Jamie Hoobanoff:

Yeah, so somehow the recruitment manager at 1-800-GOT-JUNK had come across this essay that I had written about 1-800-GOT-JUNK's guerrilla marketing strategy. And, so they reached out to me and they're like, "Hey, we think you're a really impressive young individual and we'd love to interview you." And so, I said, "Sure, of course." And when I went for the interview, they said, "Well, what do you want to do?" And I was like, "I don't know. Marketing? I have a degree now in marketing. So, let's do that." And she's like, "Well, we're not really hiring in marketing, but would you consider recruitment?" And I said yes. I had no idea what a recruiter did or what recruitment was as a line of business.

And so I went home and I Googled "recruitment," "recruiter," "job titles" and "job descriptions." And so anyway, fast forward, I started there as a recruitment coordinator and I was promoted three times very quickly. And I think that my first year we hired over a hundred salespeople and the company was just exploding and it was so fascinating and it was so exciting to learn something so new and to be, quite honestly very good at it.

Lisa Bragg:

I love that you said, and you owned, that you're good at your job. You own that. Tell me how you got to that spot in your thinking, that you know you're great at this.

Jamie Hoobanoff:

Yeah. I think that, there's a lot of studies and quantifiable information out there that repetition is really the best measurement of expertise. When I stop and think about it, having personally interviewed over 10,000 people, that is a clear indication of repetition. So there is

that quantifiable measurement that indicates that I'm really good at it and I'm an expert at it.

But I think for me personally, where I decided and knew I was good at it is not only when I was helping make these hires either at a corporate level or at an agency level, is when these hires are being made, but then fast forward five, six, seven, sometimes 10 years later and these people are still there and they're thriving and they've been promoted and they're having a material impact on that organization. That was the true indicator to me that, hey, I know what I'm doing and I know what I'm doing not only as an expert, but on behalf of my clients. I'm able to do it for myself and I'm able to produce great work, but I'm also able to do it on behalf of somebody. So I think that's when I realized that I'm really good at this.

Lisa Bragg:

So we'll fast forward your story here. You worked your way up the ladder over the years, became VP of a recruitment agency, but then decided to make the switch from being an employee to an employer. Tell me about that.

Jamie Hoobanoff:

All of that combined is really where I am today because my passion and where I had the most success and most excitement was when I was working for and with start-ups, which is why I founded The Leadership Agency.

Lisa Bragg:

So tell me more about your company.

Jamie Hoobanoff:

Yeah. So The Leadership Agency is a recruitment agency that focuses and works exclusively with start-ups all across North America. So we work with companies that, anything from a seed round size company where maybe they're pre-revenue, all the way to companies that are IPO, that are large and scaling and looking to potentially go public, but one day, or in the past, they were a really small company. We work with companies that we believe are changing our world. We get to help build some of the most impressive companies of our generation. And we believe that anything that can be disrupted will be disrupted and it all comes from a start-up. And so we get to help these founders and their investors make some of the most important hires of their company's history.

Lisa Bragg:

You like to help people who are disruptors, but we are in the most disrupted era that we know of, that we've been in, that we've lived with COVID-19. This is taped in May of 2020. How have you maneuvered through this era, this time, when we're in the early stages right now of it?

Jamie Hoobanoff:

Every day has been different. And I know that that's a bit of a cliché, taking it one day at a time, but that really has been, I'd say, consistently for the past three or four weeks, been my mantra is literally one day at a time. But our strategy and how we've maneuvered through this is that we put people first, first and foremost. We put our employees first, their health and safety and well-being. We put our clients, their safety and well-being in terms of helping them transition to virtual, interviewing, virtual onboarding, things like that. And then, ultimately, stopped to think, okay, the short-term aspect of what we're doing or what's happening to us, or how we're maneuvering through this time is very shocking and it's very triggering to elicit the fear factor.

But once you wrap your head around what's happening and realize that a lot of it's out of our control, there was a real opportunity there for us and for our clients to look at the long-term aspect of this, like the opportunity that we have to secure financing that was never available six months ago to small business owners and look at the operational aspect of our business. What can we do to improve what we're doing today? We have such a unique opportunity, so let's take it and only focus on the long-term success of our business, because that's what I want is a place and a company for our employees who have helped build this company, come back to something even greater. So it's something that we're doing. It's something that we're expressing in the marketplace and with our clients in helping them uncover opportunities within recruitment to become better and become stronger and to become more competitive when the time is right.

Lisa Bragg:

So most of us are looking to the future as entrepreneurs and corporate executives. We are looking to the future right now. What do you see as we return or go, I guess there's no returning, but as we evolve or change into this new world of work that we're going to enter into? Any crystal ball for us?

Jamie Hoobanoff:

My advice is to move quickly, but move with purpose. I think that this is going to be a forever shift towards companies realizing and understanding that a people-first mentality is the only way forward.

Lisa Bragg:

Could you elaborate on that a little bit more? So, why do you think it's now going to be people first?

Jamie Hoobanoff:

Everything we're doing right now, there's the idea, we're all in this together, and it's true. What we're doing right now is to put other people's safety and our own at the forefront. We're all staying home, we're all sacrificing. We are all doing everything that we can and

within our means and within our power to put people first. And I don't think this is something that we're ever going to be able to forget. And I think that how we think and how we feel and how we remember this time will only naturally resonate to how we conduct business and the decisions that we make and the influence that we have. And I think that the only way that we can look at this is that it's inevitable. We will put people first. We've proven that we can and continue to do that. So I think that business will ultimately have to follow suit.

Lisa Bragg:

COVID has brought massive upheaval in the workforce. And unfortunately, a large, a huge number of people will or have lost their jobs. Does this mean it's going to be easier for employers to recruit as a result?

Jamie Hoobanoff:

I think there's this idea that recruitment will become really easy because there are so many people laid off, there are so many people looking for jobs. And not... that is the truth, but as an employer, people's desires to join or their needs and their interests don't change just because there's a situation or there's, in this case a pandemic and they've been laid off. People want to join good companies. They want to join long-term career opportunities. They want to join companies that provide them access to great leadership. They want to join companies that are going to treat them in the way in which they want to be treated. So, their needs and their wants aren't changing. The only thing that's maybe different is that they need a job or they want a job, but the jobs and the companies that they choose aren't changing. And I think as an employer, this idea that there's so many more people and recruitment will become easy, but at the end of the day, recruitment is never going to be easy. It's not even easy for us, and we are the experts. Recruitment is really hard. It's why companies like mine exist because it is hard and it's important and it needs to be treated as such. But I think that employers, the opportunity here is to communicate and to connect with people in a way in which you know that they are going to be wanting to be connected with. So, tighten up your messaging, really evaluate why you're a great employer, really take an opportunity to connect on a more meaningful way. If you post a job, you are going to get thousands of people that apply to it. That's inevitable. That's a lot of time. That's a lot of resources. So yeah, post your jobs. I get it. That's a very traditional piece of the transaction, but look for ways to connect with people on a much more meaningful level, because like I said before, their needs and their wants haven't changed.

Lisa Bragg:

So right now, a lot of people have been in a temp layoff position. Do you see that they're just rightsizing or that they'll bring them back? What are you hearing from people that you talk to?

Jamie Hoobanoff:

It's going to be a combination of both, to be completely honest, and I've already started to see it. From what I've seen and my experience of having been, like I was a recruiter during the financial crisis, which I know is different on so many levels. And seeing how the financial crisis moved the dial in terms of recruitment and HR and talent best practices, this will probably spin the dial right off the machine, so to speak. So it's going to have such a lasting impact on how we operate from an HR and recruitment perspective. But I think that it's going to be a combination. I think that any time that there's this much of a disruptor and force to change, it gives you the opportunity to say, "Okay, listen, what do we need to do?"

And part of that will be, the majority of it will be temporary layoffs, and that's inevitable. And we're starting to see that companies who didn't lay off people in the beginning are starting to lay them off now. We're starting to see companies who laid people off in the beginning, bring back some of their temporary layoffs. But what we're also seeing is actual terminations, because there is an opportunity to rightsize your organization. And I think companies who are making decisions, and not all of them, I can't speak for all companies, but I think there's an opportunity there for companies to say, "Listen, our goal is to bring everybody back and go back to normal." That's everyone's goal. But the long-term future of our company, could we run 10 percent leaner? Can we be more efficient if we were to shift our organization to a work-from-home culture or completely redesign our revenue model, which we all have an opportunity to look at right now? Will we be more efficient with less people? And so I think that companies are taking the opportunity to do what they need to do long term and short term for their business.

Lisa Bragg:

And on the flip side of that, I think a lot of employees have really taken the time during this period to do some soul searching. Are you hearing anything from employees?

Jamie Hoobanoff:

Yes, definitely. I think that we're probably hearing more from employees and candidates and people in the marketplace looking for jobs because on the opposite end of the equation are people who have an opportunity to, like you said, do soul searching and think, "Okay, I'm temporarily laid off. I want to go back to that company. I would like to go back to normal, but maybe I don't." And that is just something that as employers, we're all going to have to consider and factor in is that you may want to bring back 100 percent of your people, but maybe only 90 percent of them want to come back.

So yes, there's definitely these conversations happening. There is a real opportunity for people to explore the market. And I go back to the point I made earlier, is that 80 percent of business-to-business brands have never been heard of. So this is a great time for people who are maybe having those conversations with themselves about soul searching and looking beyond what their current role is to start doing some research. Look for companies that you wouldn't otherwise know unless you have the time to research or to think about. So it's definitely happening.

Lisa Bragg:

We have a lot of women executives who listen to the podcast. What would you say to them as they start thinking about coming back to the workplace? We're all working at home, but what does it look like if we start thinking about actually ramping up and returning to work?

Jamie Hoobanoff:

My suggestion to everyone when they come back is that there is an opportunity to lead. And it's not necessarily like there's going to be a job posted that you can apply for, or an opportunity that is going to be obvious. What I mean by leadership is that there is an opportunity for anybody coming back to work to identify areas of improvement, to lead without title, to really push themselves beyond their comfort level. Take risks. Because as a founder myself, and having worked with over 3000 companies throughout North America and having worked really closely with founders and with C-level executives, is that they need leadership, especially during times like this. They need people to step up. And a lot of what holds people back, women and men and everyone, is essentially fear or waiting for the opportunity to be presented to them. And I think that collectively and universally the opportunity is being presented to you. You may just not know it, because I'm telling you that when you go back to work, there's a real opportunity to shine and to lead in some capacity.

Lisa Bragg:

So don't wait for the title.

Jamie Hoobanoff:

Exactly.

Lisa Bragg:

There's going to be quite a few people who will be looking for new jobs. What advice would you give to women executives in particular?

Jamie Hoobanoff:

My advice to women executives is essentially the same advice I would give if you were going back to your job, is don't be afraid in any way. Do not let fear hold you back from applying to a role that, it may say it's posted, there's a job description there. Not all of it is going to speak to you. You won't look at a job description ... and funny enough, they're not written to actually be 100 percent applicable. And so if you see something in a job description that you think, "You know what, I don't really have areas of expertise there. So therefore I'm not going to apply. It's asking for 10 years of experience and I only have seven-and-a-half. Or it's looking for someone who's led a team of 10 people, but I've only led a team of five people." So these are all things that typically will hold someone back because you think, "I don't have what it takes for that role. So therefore I'm not going to apply."

So my first piece of advice, when it comes to a job is 100 percent apply to it. Do not let that hold you back in any way, because I've written thousands of job descriptions and I've posted even more, and I know how little they actually mean when it comes to evaluating someone's potential for that role. So don't let it hold you back.

The other is, like I said earlier, for people who are returning to work, there may not be the perfect job posted, but it doesn't mean that the opportunities aren't out there. And so look at job seeking as, I mean, as networking, essentially. We have access to people in unprecedented ways, LinkedIn, social media. Research founders, research their investors, understand more about their product than you would have even been able to do if you worked there. There's so much good content out there. So become an expert on a company. Become an expert on their product and reach out and say, "Listen, when the opportunity arises, here are my expertise. Here is my skillset. And here's why I would want to work for you. And more importantly, here's why you would want to consider me for a role that may or may not be open now."

Lisa Bragg:

I had a friend who had- two friends who were job seekers for an international level job, and it was in France, and nobody lived in France at the time and they didn't speak French. And so the male person put it in, no problem. Had maybe 35 percent of the qualifications. Her friend, the female, had maybe 85 percent, but didn't have French and didn't want to move to France. She didn't put it in. And so the guy got it and he had very little experience and very little to offer. And they just said, "No, you are the right candidate. Oh no, you don't have to speak French. You don't have to move to France." And it just shows that she should've gone for it, the female candidate, because she was way more qualified, but the things on the list stopped her. Now, when I hire as a small business owner though, I often put in, "If you reach 65 percent of these things and have the right attitude, we'd like to talk to you," because I think that helps with the entry for access. What do you think of that approach?

Jamie Hoobanoff:

I think that's a fantastic approach. It's perfectly okay to want what you want, but a lot of times you don't know what you want. And so here you are writing a job description saying, "Yeah, I want someone with 10 years of experience," but there's a fine line between talent and experience. And it is a really unique fine line because you can be as talented at 26 years old as you are at 45 years old. And talent is something that is so important to someone's success. The difference between talent is experience. Somebody who is, say 45, will have talent, yes, but they'll also have 10 years of experience, but that's not a real indicator to somebody who's going to be successful in your role. So, staying open and open minded as an employer to talent versus just experience is really important.

Lisa Bragg:

How would that work out for the job seeker where they need to have that mindset too?

Jamie Hoobanoff:

Yes. And I think that that is something that is equally as important. If you're looking to pivot completely, so say if your experience as an executive is 10 years in marketing, and you've gone from digital to demand generation to product marketing and you have this really beautiful, I guess, set of skills and experience that make you so desirable in the marketplace, but you now want to maybe shift into something completely different. That's great. And I see it happen all the time, but being open-minded also as somebody who's seeking an opportunity to know that you may have to take a couple steps back, maybe a couple sidesteps to really get what you're looking for. And the best way to do that is to stay open-minded and to take in things that don't cross things off your list, per se. So it is 50-50.

Lisa Bragg:

You are really working on your professional brand. Professional brand, professional reputation is really a thing near and dear to my heart. You're really working on yours during this COVID era. What's your advice to job seekers and women executives?

Jamie Hoobanoff:

My advice is to say yes to almost everything. When I started the business, I said yes to everything, and I don't regret it. I said yes to every single public speaking event. I said yes to every article. I said yes to everything. And it taught me so much because I considered myself an expert, but not an executive. And so I think that as an executive, you've probably said yes to everything already. So I think as a female executive looking to connect and to build a personal brand, say yes to almost everything. And what I mean by that is, like I said earlier, move quickly, but move with purpose. So say yes to purposeful things that you think will contribute in a meaningful way to your personal brand or to whatever it is that you're looking to accomplish. So, moving forward with purpose and moving forward to things that are going to teach you new things, but more importantly, that are going to support your mission.

Lisa Bragg:

There's a phrase I've heard about where you treat your employees as you would your shareholders. Tell me a bit about that.

Jamie Hoobanoff:

Yeah. So employer branding is something also very near and dear to me because it's so important and it's hard to do, but the best way to think about it is companies who have a consumer brand, you know the usual suspects like Facebook, Google, LinkedIn, Amazon, anything that you're familiar with becomes the brand. There's a brand they're designed so that you buy or invest on some level with that brand. And that can sometimes translate into an employer brand. And that's fine, that does give you a competitive edge, but at the end of the day, 80 percent of business-to-business brands have never been heard of. And so if you

are an organization, the case in which I'm an expert in, if you're a start-up or a small business owner, if you post an ad for a VP of Sales and Google posts an ad for a VP of Sales, Google will likely win. There's no doubt about that.

And so you have to establish an employment brand because establishing a consumer brand at this point would just really not be in your best interest if you're a business-to-business brand. And so establishing an employment brand looks a lot and feels a lot like the brand and the information that you create and curate for your investors. So when you are a founder or a small business owner, and you walk into a boardroom full of investors and you want them to invest in your company, you're sharing things with them like the vision of the company. You're essentially lifting up the hood. You're saying, "Here's my run rate. Here's my average deal size. Here's my average sales cycle. Here's our trajectory. Here's our gaps. Here's our challenges. Here's how we're going to mitigate those challenges and fill those gaps. And here's why we need your money," and so on. "And here's your return on your investment." And essentially when you have employees or you're looking to bring on new employees, they are essentially investing in your company with their time and their expertise. So it's more important now than ever to not only treat your current employees like shareholders, communicate and then over-communicate with them, but also to treat your potential new employees like shareholders and investors.

Lisa Bragg:

So many people feel that they're safe right now. They do feel comfortable and confident. But what's your advice to people, as we go back to work in this new era?

Jamie Hoobanoff:

I think that safety is important. I think that a lot of us are going to crave a certain level of safety and stability, and that's perfectly OK. I think my biggest piece of advice to anyone who has a job right now, or whose role wasn't disrupted, that's going to generate a certain level of safety. And like I said, that's perfectly okay. But I think the one thing that this has taught us is that the job you have today may not be yours tomorrow or a month from now. There's so many things that are going to continue to happen from this. It truly is a ripple effect. And so I think that being proactive and passive at the same time is everyone's best approach because if you aren't open to hearing about opportunities and to learning about opportunities constantly while you feel safe, I think could potentially put you in a situation where you are reacting to a situation, and that's not really where anyone wants to be. Whether you are somebody who's actively looking for a role, or who's not looking for a role, reacting to something is never where anyone wants to be.

And so, like I mentioned before, 80 percent of business-to-business brands have never been heard of. So be really proactive, keep an open mind, don't shut the blinds to opportunities or to people who reach out to you. It's not always going to be something that you need to say yes to. Like, if you know right off the bat that this is not a company you want to work for, that is not an opportunity that you think is in line with your current skillset or what you want to be doing in the future, then don't say yes, but don't say no to everything.

Lisa Bragg:

It's always worth a conversation, isn't it?

Jamie Hoobanoff:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Lisa Bragg:

So Jamie, often on Bold(h)er, we ask these three questions. So here we go. What's the boldest thing you've ever done?

Jamie Hoobanoff:

I think the boldest thing I've ever done is start this company, start The Leadership Agency. It's a very competitive industry, fiercely competitive, I should say. And I'm a competitive person. There's no doubt about it. So it's in line with what drives me, but I'd say the boldest thing I've ever done is starting this company.

Lisa Bragg:

When do you wish you were bolder?

Jamie Hoobanoff:

Well, that's a great question. I think I would have to say being bolder in our marketing and our branding. Sometimes we take a bit of a back seat because we're like, "We know we're the best. We know that we provide great value," but I think that there's an opportunity to be a lot bolder.

Lisa Bragg:

What would you say to your 12-year-old self?

Jamie Hoobanoff:

I would say, "Self-awareness is way more important than you think it's going to be and you better learn it quick."

Lisa Bragg:

You've been listening to Bold(h)er, brought to you by BMO for Women. Our guest today was Jamie Hoobanoff, founder of The Leadership Agency. I'm Lisa Bragg. If you like the show, please subscribe, share, and review. Thank you to our team at MediaFace and to our producer, Sarah Senior. Thanks for listening.