

HR insights podcast

Series 9 | Episode 11

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Does your company culture match your values?

Stuart Elliott (00:22)

Hi everyone, welcome back to HR Insights. My name is Stuart Elliott and I will be your host today. Today we're going to talk about organisational culture and the growing disconnect between the culture leaders believe they've created and the reality their employees experience. Joining me today to talk about this is Scott McInnes, he's founder of Inspiring Change, a culture and internal communications consultancy. Over 25 years of experience, Scott helps organisations build cultures that engage, support, and retain their people. It's a really good, good lesson. And Scott speaks a lot from the experience of working with different clients. I really hope you enjoy the show today.

Stuart Elliott (01:10)

Hi Scott, welcome to HR Insights. How are you today?

Scott McInnes (01:13)

I am really well, thanks Stuart, despite the fact that it's a little grey, a little dreary here in Dublin.

Stuart Elliott (01:18)

Okay.

Scott McInnes (01:19)

Although I'm here 26 years this year, originally from Scotland. I was dragged here. Well, I wasn't really dragged. I was persuaded to come here for the love of a good woman. Then my girlfriend and now the mother of my grown-up children, two of whom have since left home. So it all feels like it's coming a little bit full circle.

Stuart Elliott (01:40)

You mentioned two, one more child soon to leave home or have you got a few more years?

Scott McInnes (01:43)

One more, so one more is doing his leaving cert, if you're here in Ireland, or the equivalent of A levels. So he's kind of last two years of school now. So he's really enjoying the fact that neither of his two sisters are here anymore to take some of the laser, the academic laser focus of my wife. And so he is getting all of that laser focus all to himself, which is, you know, I suspect he's really, really enjoying.

Stuart Elliott (02:08)

Is he enjoying, I suppose, not having his two sisters give him give him a lot of stick as well? 'Cause I'm assuming that does happen from older sisters.

Scott McInnes (02:15)

Look, I think it's funny, as kids get older, they kind of come to a place where they recognise that they're not kids and they're adults and they get on with each other a lot better. I actually think he'll miss, I think he misses the middle one he's tight with. The

Stuart Elliott (02:29)

Right.

Scott McInnes (02:29)

elder one, elder siblings, you always have a bit of a punch up with every now and again, don't you? But there's certainly

Stuart Elliott (02:33)

Yeah.

Scott McInnes (02:34)

the middle one, yeah, I'd he misses her and it's a quiet house, it's weird, it's, yeah, yeah.

Stuart Elliott (02:37)

That's nice. Yeah, that's that's ri that's really nice. And talk to us a little bit more about Inspire and Change. It'd be nice to have a little bit of a summary in terms of the business, what it does, what it stands for, how you set it up, those sorts of things.

Scott McInnes (02:51)

So I'm 25 years, I've been saying this for years, 25 years working in comms. I've been saying that for years. So it's probably more like 30 years, which is God, it makes me sound really

Stuart Elliott (02:59)

Yeah.

Scott McInnes (03:00)

old. And I founded Inspiring Change in 2017. Prior to that, last, what my kids often refer to as dad's last proper job, I was in AIB, which is one of our two big pillar banks here in Ireland. I was effectively deputy head of internal comms and engagement there for five years. And in 2017, I said, I think my time here is done. I'd worked for myself for many years before that. And I spun out inspiring change. And back then in 2017, it was all about how do we help organisations improve internal comms and engagement.

Over the years, so that'd be 10 years next year in June, we've evolved. And we've evolved much more into the organisational culture space. So we talk very much about helping organisations to build stronger and more aligned cultures. with intentionality. So how do we help our clients to be more intentional about the culture they need to deliver the strategy they've got? And we work with clients from probably our biggest is 10,000 people in the PSNI all the way down to the Institute of Banking of 80 people. So small and large public and private sector in Ireland, the UK and further afield. So yeah, so it's been a ride and it's just really, really interesting work.

Stuart Elliott (04:14)

Yeah.

Scott McInnes (04:14)

I think maybe something we might get to talk about later on, the whole idea of purpose and just purposeful work. It feels like going in and helping organisations set themselves up for success, but in doing so, giving their people an amazing of culture to work in as well and being very, very deliberate and intentional about that. So yeah,

Stuart Elliott (04:34)

Yeah.

Scott McInnes (04:34)

it's great. Really, really enjoy it.

Stuart Elliott (04:36)

Very good. I is the business just you or are there sort of other partners or colleagues as well? Okay.

Scott McInnes (04:41)

There's four of us currently in the business and we work with a really nice network of associates and there'll only be people of a certain age who'll get this analogy. But I like to think of it as like the Thunderbirds, that if you came to me with an emergency and I was paying a lot of Thunderbird twos to sit on a bench, then the answer would be Thunderbird two. If a client comes to us now and says, we've got this emergency, well, I can do a bit of Thunderbird one, a bit of Thunderbird three, and a bit of Thunderbird five. And for the next project. the next client or even the next project within that client, you can pick a team that's got specific skills that really, really help to support that particular client's needs as opposed to whoever I've got sitting on the bench. And of course, just from a business perspective, it means you're not carrying a gigantic payroll as well, which is good from cashflow.

Stuart Elliott (05:30)

Yeah. Yeah, I can't totally understand that. And then like you mentioned obviously family, you mentioned work. What else do you do outside of outside of work and family?

Scott McInnes (05:39)

You know what? I used to do a lot of triathlon and I did a lot of triathlon up to about five years ago and my turbo was just literally sitting here just out of shot on camera.

Stuart Elliott (05:43)

Okay, very cool.

Scott McInnes (05:44)

I need to actually get back to that. I need to get back to a little more exercise. I love cycling. I love being out on the bike, but I also love to travel. I think travel is probably my first love and just going back to the kids. think the places that we've brought them and the things that they've seen and experienced. I think that really sets kids up for life. Just knowing that there's different ways of doing things, different people, different languages, different cultures, different everything. And I think it just makes them more rounded individuals. And I think that's a real gift that a parent can give to a child.

Stuart Elliott (06:29)

Yeah, I'd completely agree. Did you combine the triplons with a bit of travel as well?

Scott McInnes (06:34)

Most of them were here. So I did do Ironman in Barcelona and I did Half Ironman in Portugal. So both of them were really, really nice events, very flat. So that was good on the bike.

Stuart Elliott (06:48)

Yeah.

Scott McInnes (06:48)

But yeah, so mostly Europe, mostly European stuff.

Stuart Elliott (06:52)

Still it's just it's the time investment on the on the Iron Man. It's interesting you mentioned you say you do triathlons and then you throw it and then you did an Iron Man. They're very different things in my view. Like the Iron Man, the time that it takes to just train for one is just super impressive that people put into it.

Scott McInnes (07:07)

Yeah, six days a week for 10 months.

Stuart Elliott (07:10)

Yeah. And it and then the amount of time we're out on the bike during the day. Like that is six, seven hour bike rides and no joke.

Scott McInnes (07:15)

Yeah. Yeah.

Stuart Elliott (07:16)

Yeah.

Scott McInnes (07:19)

Yeah, yeah, yeah, no, my bottom wasn't thanking me after 10 months. Let's just see that.

Stuart Elliott (07:25)

Yeah, I remember doing a few in there. You literally go out there and spend hours looking at the best saddle to go and buy that actually might be a little bit more comfortable than the one you've got. Very, very good. But obviously I was I was going through the questions today, I was looking at the sort of the first question around I suppose every organisation having a culture and the phrase that's used here is obviously not every culture, not every organisation builds it with intention. what does that mean? Talk us through building a culture with intention.

Scott McInnes (08:05)

Really interesting. every fact, every organisation has a culture, the end. And either as the leaders of that organisation, you choose to harness that and use that. I look at, if I think about cultures, culture is not a soft, fluffy, amorphous thing that HR looks after. Culture is a measurable asset in an organisation. And for me, culture is simply the vehicle for strategy. So that old line that gets pranked out all the time the Peter Drucker line of culture eating strategy for breakfast, which by the way, spoiler alert, he never actually said ever, but it doesn't make it any less true.

Stuart Elliott (08:42)

Why?

Scott McInnes (08:42)

If we don't have a culture that supports our organisational strategy, then we're not going to be able to deliver what needs to be delivered. And it's not that we won't deliver any of it. We just probably won't deliver all of it. We might get to 60 or 70 or 80%, but that means we're leaving some. some strategy, some performance, some revenue potentially on the table. So when we think about culture, we think about it from the perspective of what do you need your culture to do for you as a business? And that starts at the end. That starts with that conversation. In order to achieve the strategy we've got, what's the culture that we need to have? And that might be something which is more innovative, could be something that's more open, could be something that's more about collaboration, could be something that's more about taking risk.

And of course that's about looking forward to see what it is we want to do but also looking back to see where we've come from. And we'll often say then, well go out and measure your culture. Go out and measure it quantitatively and whether you're using Culture Amp or if you're using Denison who we partner with and then some of the qualitative stuff on top by asking people, well, what do you think the culture is like and why do we see these scores like that and these scores like that in the survey? Talk to me, what does that look like? So. If we can be a little bit more intentional about where we want to go and all pulling in the same direction and then working out how we get there, communicating that down through our leaders and down to our people, it means that we actually create a very, very intentional culture designed effectively to deliver the strategy that we have.

Stuart Elliott (10:19)

Yeah. Where does where does culture come from? Because I think I think back to sort of starting all when you start an organisation, when I started an organisation, it was more a case of I had a problem to solve, not necessarily for the client, but I didn't I didn't assume then by setting up a company I'd set up a culture. But I assume does that happen naturally? How do you decide what your culture is or looks like if I suppose when I set it up I wasn't even thinking about that?

Scott McInnes (10:47)

And you know what, Stuart, you're probably not the only one. Nobody does. Nobody opens the door on day one, sits down at the desk and says, right, what do I want my culture to be?

Stuart Elliott (10:50)

Right.

Scott McInnes (10:51)

They sit down and they go, Jesus, where are we going to get our clients from?

Stuart Elliott (10:55)

Yeah.

Scott McInnes (10:56)

Who's going to give us money? I need to go out and drink loads

Stuart Elliott (11:00)

Yeah.

Scott McInnes (11:00)

of cups of coffee with everybody and try and bring in some projects. know, culture starts with founders. So if you're a small business, the culture has started with you. The culture is for me, underpinned by values. So your culture is the... the values, the behaviours, the systems and the processes that everyone aligns around in the organisation. But in the early days, those are your values and behaviours, your systems and processes as the founder in the business. What you have to think about as you move on, and this is where probably the intentionality piece starts to come in, is what served us then, back on day one, month one, year one, is it serving us now? Based on where the company has gone in the interim period, based on what our clients want from us, based on the fact that we've now got 50 staff or 100 staff where on day one it was just Stuart and maybe one or two others. S

o how do we shape that culture, taking the best bits of what we had before, but also thinking about what we need to move forward and actually putting that down effectively on paper and saying, this is the culture that we want. And we don't do that by going off to a country club and agreeing that with our senior leaders and coming back and then foisting it on people, we sit down and we say, in order to achieve what we need to achieve, we think we need to do this.

Stuart Elliott (12:16)

Yeah.

Scott McInnes (12:16)

What do you think? To everybody in the organisation and we co-create that. So I think it's really interesting. I think it's a great question that it starts with founders and thinking about where it is we want to go, what the context is, what clients are looking for that will help to shape and bring the best bits of that forward. as companies start to grow or continue to grow and change.

Stuart Elliott (12:44)

Yeah. So and I suppose we're digressing a little bit but when you've got smaller companies but then the bigger the company gets, I'm assuming that's when we start to see maybe slight disconnect with what maybe leaders believe the culture is and the actual experience of the employees, the workers. So I'm assuming that once an organisation is thousands of people, there can be a huge disconnect, correct?

Scott McInnes (13:09)

Massively. And when you think about it, where culture really matters and where culture really hits the road is in those little moments of behaviours and of how things happen in meetings, in one-to-ones, in how we work and collaborate with each other. Do we throw somebody under a bus in another team when something goes wrong? That's all culture. All of that.

So what we need to do is make sure that we've got our culture really well. This is why intentionality is so important. That actually once we've got an idea of what our intentional culture is, that we codify that. And we codify that through values and we codify that through behaviours, but then we have to hold people accountable for those values and those behaviours so that when you, if we have a value of we always do the right thing, and there was an instance, Stuart, where you didn't do the right thing, that it's my job as your leader or in organisations where culture is really well embedded, perhaps even as your peer, to say, Stuart, that wasn't great. Can we have a conversation about what happened in that meeting last week? because if we believe that to be one of our values, then that really wasn't aligned with one of our values. And think what gets really interesting is when we start to use those values as lenses through which to make decisions.

Stuart is an absolutely brilliant salesman. He's done double the revenue target that he had, but from a culture perspective, he has left a trail of dead bodies and detritus behind him to get that number. What is it we want in our organisation? Because if we don't want that, then we've got to make a hard decision. And that hard decision might be, Stuart doesn't work here anymore. My God, but he's bringing in so much money. Yes, but if people see that and they go, well, if he can act like that, if he can do that, just because he's bringing in the money, so that's what they really care about. They really just care about the money. And that's not something necessarily, if that is the case, we're open and honest about that. Our culture is to make money. plenty of organisations are and plenty of people like that. Plenty of people enjoy that. But if you don't and if that's not the culture you want then you take that in hand.

Stuart Elliott (15:07)

Yeah. How hard is that though, I suppose, then if you're so reliant on certain people that are to your point bringing in the money? How hard is that to 'cause it there's realistic scenarios that if you get rid of that you'll you're gonna be struggling for a period of time to then get the culture that you want. And that's very difficult to deal with.

Scott McInnes (15:24)

Yeah. Yeah. Super hard, like probably one of the hardest things as a business leader you're ever going to have to do.

Stuart Elliott (15:32)

Yeah.

Scott McInnes (15:33)

And that boils down to how you feel in your heart, which yes, I totally take the point that if you got rid of the guy doing the number, it's gonna cause you a bit of pain for a while, but what kind of organisation do you want? And maybe actually, look, I've been very black and white, that the person just goes, actually, maybe they don't just go, maybe there's a performance conversation to be had, maybe there's some coaching. maybe there's their leader jumping in. Lots of leaders, lots of people leaders don't feel as though they have the skills, the confidence, the tools to have those difficult conversations. So maybe there's something that we need to look at from that perspective in our organisations to work out what is it as a leader I need to do in order to bring my team along.

And you know, look, that person not working in the organisation anymore is kind of the nuclear option. There are plenty of things we can do to nip that in the bud. beforehand. What people want to see is that you're doing something about it. That we're not just going, it's fine that person's acting like that, they're doing that, they're ignoring the values, they're literally showing two fingers to the behaviours, and they don't care less about anybody else. What they want to see is that if that is the

case, somebody's kind of taking that in hand, that somebody's doing something about that. And that's important.

Stuart Elliott (16:52)

Yeah. it is important, but it's it is it's very difficult to do.

Scott McInnes (16:55)

Really hard.

Stuart Elliott (16:56)

Is there a is there a right time to do that? 'Cause I can imagine if markets are tight and you're so reliant on those sort of individuals, is it better to do that kind of move when the business is going very well? Is that the time to sort of clean shop in some respects? Or is there never a good time?

Scott McInnes (17:13)

think there's ever a good time. I the best time is in the moment that something happens.

Stuart Elliott (17:14)

Yeah. Right.

Scott McInnes (17:17)

If we take somebody aside and have a difficult conversation in the moment that something happens, then A, we nip it in the bud quicker so it doesn't become accepted behaviour. B, we're seen to be doing that by others in the organisation, so it looks like we actually care about the culture we said we want or the values we said we've got. don't get me, there are plenty of organisations where there are personalities. that I described a minute ago who are doing the number and they're just left there. And to be really realistic about it, that's just gonna happen. But I think for leaders in organisations, it's thinking always about what kind of culture do I want to have? What kind of people do I want to employ? What kind of environment do I want to create?

Stuart Elliott (18:00)

Yeah.

Scott McInnes (18:00)

And am I gonna have to make some difficult decisions sometimes? Yeah, maybe. But I'm just supposed to answer your question. I don't think there is necessarily a good. I think the best time to do it is, as I say, immediately when it's happened. Just have a conversation and again, it's not about hitting a nuclear button. This is all going wrong. Out, go on, you've got a month's garden leave, goodbye. It's about, something's going a bit awry here. What can I do to help? How can I support? What's going on? We don't often know what's going on in somebody's life, you know, outside of work. And there could be a whole load of stuff that's happening for them that means they're turning up to work like the person they're turning up as. And we don't know that unless we ask the question, but often because we know that managers don't often have the skills or the qualifications, the capability, the confidence to have those conversations, they just never happen. So, it just gets worse and worse and worse to the point where you kind of go, well, Jesus, it's too hard to have the conversation now because it's gone too far down the line.

Stuart Elliott (18:53)

Yeah.

Scott McInnes (18:53)

And that's hard. yeah, nipping it in the bud early, having the hard conversation early, I think it's really important.

Stuart Elliott (19:04)

Yeah, I can resonate with that. I've definitely left conversations to one side and not had them and to your point they just become harder and harder. so that when you actually want to do it's almost impossible. It's not it's not impossible completely, but it feels like it when you're when you're trying to do it. I want to talk to you about some of the research. The research mind the gap. in terms of I suppose it well I understand it, unidentified five culture gaps holding back holding organisations back. Can you just give us a sort of a summary of what they are and what you did on this research?

Scott McInnes (19:37)

Sure. So just probably to start a little bit further back, this is a of research we did last year and I wanted to go out and find out from people leaders, particularly chief people officers. So we spoke to loads.

Stuart Elliott (19:39)

Mm. Yeah.

Scott McInnes (19:48)

It was a qualitative survey. It was one question. And the question was, what in your organisation is getting in the way of you having a strong and aligned culture? That was it. So three answers from each of the respondents. And we said, I want to know what's happening in your organisation specifically. don't. I don't really care about what you think is going on broadly in the market. I can use AI for that or I can use Google or whatever. There's lots of reports out there. I want to know what's going on in your organisation. And what we'll do is we'll anonymise your feedback. We'll roll it up into themes and we'll just report back the themes. Now, when I did the debrief for a group of respondents who came in, I did the debrief and I said, there's good news and bad news.

Stuart Elliott (20:29)

Right.

Scott McInnes (20:29)

The good news is there's nothing new in here. And the bad news is... There's nothing new in here. A lot of the stuff that we saw, a lot of the themes that we saw were things that we keep seeing and have been seeing for years. Leadership, skill and will. So the will and the skill of leaders to have conversations and think about the fact that they need to be more intentional about their organisational culture to deliver that strategy they have because ultimately there's a bit of revenue behind it. It's a performance indicator, if you like, and it supports performance of the organisation. The second one was the manager factor. I've said it a couple of times now, the skill, the confidence, the tools, the ability to be a manager. And there are research reports galore every single year that basically all say, we keep putting people in people management roles, but we don't give them good enough training. We don't give them good enough expertise. We don't give them tools or confidence to do that job really well. Ordinarily, they're plucked often out of their team on a Friday as a peer.

And on a Monday, here is the boss. That's really hard. What have we given them to help them through that transition of work into that new role? And the answer often is very little. Skills for today and tomorrow was the third theme that we came up with. And that's all about actually fostering a culture of continuous learning and learning not being about going on courses. And I'm always minded of that 70, 20, 10. ratio that 70 % of your learning is just through you doing the work. It's just through you actually doing the work that you do day in, day out. 20 % is from you working with other people and other teams and only 10 % comes from courses. But we speak to people and we say, well, you know, in their, in their end of year wrap up, well, you know, to talk to me about, you know, development and learning this year, I didn't get any.

Stuart Elliott (22:30)

Ha ha.

Scott McInnes (22:32)

Well, okay. You didn't go on in courses per say. or any off-sites or whatever, but talk to me about the learning, because that's different. Learning is different to courses. So that was the third one. Accountability for values was the fourth one that came up. And remember, these are all being fed back from Chief People Officers. We don't hold our people to account for living our values well enough. And for me, values are the absolute foundation of culture, the signposts that point towards that culture ambition that we know we want in our organisation. If we don't hold people accountable for them, then that old line that we trot out often of values becoming words on a wall, that's exactly what happens. They just end up becoming words on a wall because nobody believes them because they don't see them lived. And the fifth one, which actually led onto this year's research, which we might get onto later on, was this idea of disconnection. That CPOs didn't feel as though their people were as connected to their organisations since COVID than they were perhaps before. And the same the other way that organisations didn't feel as connected to their people, people didn't feel as connected to the organisations. And that's a challenge, a really big challenge. And we've seen a lot more research since that very much talks to that challenge, not just in our working lives and the relationship we have with an employer, but in our personal lives as well. You're sitting in the office, I'm sitting at home. I might not see anybody all day today. I see them on Teams, but actually real human connection with the pheromones and the chemicals and perhaps the pat on the shoulder and all of that. We don't have that and that's a big challenge for people in organisations. So was a really interesting bit of research we did last year.

Stuart Elliott (24:16)

Yeah. And that research bridging the connection gap is what I'm assuming you were referring to there, in terms of that disconnection.

Scott McInnes (24:20)

Hmm.

Stuart Elliott (24:21)

We'll come back to that 'cause there's a couple of bits. There's a couple of questions I had just first, so it's nice that you sort of ran through that. I wanna t there's two things I wanna touch on. I do want to touch on the middle managers because increasingly I hear so much about middle managers.

Scott McInnes (24:33)

Hmm.

Stuart Elliott (24:34)

You've explained it really well in terms of we thrust them into these roles, we don't really give them any sort of development. We just ask them to sort of suddenly manage a team. is there an argument though that we that they should be good managers, they live and breathe it a little bit like where you said 70% of what they do is on the job they've seen and work with managers. So when we put them into these roles, should we be assessing them in a better way or should we is it just us not providing the right development for them?

Scott McInnes (25:07)

Do you drive a car?

Stuart Elliott (25:09)

Yes.

Scott McInnes (25:10)

How long have you your licence for?

Stuart Elliott (25:12)

Ooh, too long. thirty years.

Scott McInnes (25:14)

Me too. Do you think that makes either of us good driving instructors?

Stuart Elliott (25:19)

Absolutely no.

Scott McInnes (25:21)

Bingo. So when we think about it, just because we've seen and remember that our experience of people managers may have been bad ones. So if our experience of people management has not been great, then we are probably going to grow a bit like parents. We see poor parenting or good parenting if we've grown up with poor parenting or a dad who was an alcoholic or a mom who wasn't there very much because she would prefer to go off and do her hobbies. That's what we end up like as well, because we're simply, we're playing back what was role modelled to us, parenting or leadership.

So we, without the, is what really strong management or leadership means in this organisation, and this is how we will support you to deliver that. Without that, we just go, well, I wonder what I think a good manager does. And in my experience, they do this, this, and this. crikey. Well, if we have everyone doing that, then we have no consistency. in how our management philosophy in the organisation is applied. the other thing is that we don't see, know, so we, a really good friend of mine who is, he's eventually, he's now the CTO in a big organisation. He's got 3000 staff working for him. And he said to me a couple of years back, he said, you know what, Scott, there are days where I just want to write some code.

Stuart Elliott (26:47)

Yeah.

Scott McInnes (26:49)

I don't want to worry about people sick leave or their mental health or a management challenge that Jim's having with Sarah or some underperformance issue. I just want to write some code. And I think it's interesting that to use your term, we pluck people out of teams. They're a really good coder, a really good lawyer, a really good health and safety person, and we make them a manager. And they're just not a very good manager. So not only are we putting them in a position where they know in their heart of hearts, they're not doing the best job in the world, but they're also not either doing the job that they loved anymore. So it's like a double whammy. I'm not getting to do the stuff that I loved anymore, because I loved working in tech, I loved working in health and safety, I loved working as a lawyer, and I'm also now not, I'm not getting to do that anymore, and I'm also not very good at the people leadership stuff. And I feel that. I know that in my head, but I feel it in my heart. And I come to work every day going, my God, I'm not sure I can have another hard conversation. I've just never been told how to. And it's really easy to say, why should we have to? Because you've been living that for 10 years or 20 years. We have to, because if we don't, then as I said earlier, we get people going off in 20 different directions with management and leadership. And we want that to be consistent.

Stuart Elliott (28:09)

Have we has mid-level management got harder over the years? Like I feel as though I'm not necessarily sure saying it was is easier, but when everyone was in an office, you could see your whole team, you could see their mood, you could understand if people maybe were not feeling their best or not performing or needed to be sent home and just go and sit on the couch and do nothing for a day or something. Is it harder now because of how complex the work environment actually is as well?

Scott McInnes (28:37)

Yes, I would say it definitely is. And I think that's probably one of the things that we found in this year's research when it came to connection was that hybrid working is a massive challenge. And I think the challenge with hybrid working is that we don't look at it any further than is Stuart working in the office today or is Stuart working at home? And that's the only angle that we look at when we're thinking about hybrid working. We don't think about, well, okay, The work that Stuart's doing today, is that best done in the office or is it best done at home? Is it best done with quiet time at a desk in his cabin in the garden or is it best done in a room with the team? Who else does Stuart need to interact with across the organisation to get that work done in order to get it done really, really well? And actually, are those people going to be in the day that he's in? Because if not, then that's a wasted journey. Because if those people end up on Teams calls all day in a booth on one of our core in-office days, then... It's a waste of time them being there because that could all be done at home.

Stuart Elliott (29:35)

Yeah.

Scott McInnes (29:36)

And also it's not serving Stuart because he's not able to go and talk to them because I'm on Teams calls all day. So there's a whole lot of things we need to think about just from a how we work perspective. And then of course you layer in the growing challenge of mental health, the growing challenge of neurodiversity in the workplace,

Stuart Elliott (29:56)

Yeah.

Scott McInnes (29:57)

the growing challenge of people. being more empathetic, of being more aware, of being more reflective, all these things that we're throwing at leaders and they're going, Jesus, and I have to do a job as well. Because actually we don't differentiate between people leader roles and subject matter expertise roles with a career path or a career ladder that matches all the way up. So we expect them to do a job as well as doing the people leaderships. Have you done your people leadership? yes, I did that on Tuesday morning. So I'm good now for the week. It's part and parcel of the role, but it's not maybe necessarily communicated like that or seen like that in organisations.

Stuart Elliott (30:33)

Yeah and I do think that we've done a number of different podcasts like talking about neurodivergent workforce. I think it's amazing some of the studies and research, but it's so yeah, it's so hard.

Scott McInnes (30:44)

So hard.

Stuart Elliott (30:44)

Because you can have a team of ten people and each of them have different demands or different ways of working that you are then trying to support as a manager. And

Scott McInnes (30:55)

Yeah.

Stuart Elliott (30:57)

That's time consuming. It's not only it's not only challenging, I think, mentally, but it's also time consuming to try and pick up on different cues and different signals and different ways that people want to work.

Scott McInnes (31:09)

And we did have those issues before we were still neurodivergent before.

Stuart Elliott (31:11)

Yeah.

Scott McInnes (31:12)

They still had mental health issues before, but they've just bubbled up, rightly, toward the surface more now. And they're just more visible and probably more talked about, I'd say, more surfaced than they were previously, even pre-COVID. I'd say probably in the past five years, these have been topics that have really come to the fore, and rightly, but it does put more pressure on leaders, for sure.

Stuart Elliott (31:38)

Yeah, without doubt. I wanna I wanna move us on to the bridging the connection gap in terms of the I suppose the sense of disconnection that you mentioned earlier. Do you wanna talk us through again that research and go into it 'cause it sounds like it was follow up research to your previous research the year before, is that right? Yeah.

Scott McInnes (31:53)

Yeah, totally was. so since we did that research and that disconnection theme came out, I'd been looking at lots of research that come out. And the one that just kept striking me was European Commission research from earlier on, 2022, that came out. And it said it was a review of loneliness. It was a study on loneliness in Europe. And the loneliest country, the lowest country in Europe was Ireland, which... Having lived here for 26 years just amazed me.

Stuart Elliott (32:22)

I would have thought that.

Scott McInnes (32:23)

Yeah, you go to any pub, any cafe, people will talk to you. Absolutely guaranteed. So it really surprised me because that's not what loneliness is about. Loneliness is about how somebody feels. you know, we're seeing lots of challenges with hybrid, lots of challenges of how people are working, lots of challenges with leaders. Back to your point about finding it harder in this new world of work. So I kind of said, well, let's double down on the disconnection one for this year's research. So we went out again, out to a whole lot of people leaders, one question, qualitative survey, what are the top three things you need to do to build strong and human connections in your organisation? And one of the big challenges that came out, the biggest one was busyness. Almost everybody talked about busyness. What are the barriers to building a strong human connection in your organisation? We're too busy to do that. We're too busy to take the time. We're too busy for the cups of coffee, the walk around the block, how are you getting on the water cooler moments as we've called them for years.

Stuart Elliott (33:24)

Yeah.

Scott McInnes (33:25)

And that's a challenge. And when I said to them, but surely AI, is that not like you're probably using AI to do some of the grunt work now to take away some of the work that you're doing and that must free up time for this. And he said, yeah, it frees up time, but it just frees up time for doing more work.

Stuart Elliott (33:42)

Yeah.

Scott McInnes (33:43)

So we're getting busier and busier and busier. and work is just accelerating all the time. And somebody said to me, it feels like during COVID, it was literally shoulder to the wheel overnight. We've got to fundamentally change everything we do, how we work, how we do it, our systems and process. We've got to get thousand laptops out the door. And it felt like work went to 90 million miles an hour and it just hasn't come back. So that busyness one, and that's something we can do something about. That's something we can say. We can diarise 15 minutes and we can actually purposefully and intentionally make time available for our people.

Stuart Elliott (34:24)

Yeah.

Scott McInnes (34:25)

Being more human about hybrid and more intentional about hybrid, I won't go over that again because we spoke about that a second ago in terms of what are you doing, where are you doing it, who do you need to do it with, let's make that question a wider question in terms of what does good hybrid look like. And we're seeing, and I'm sure you're seeing this and hearing this and we see it on the news all the time, know, CEOs hitting big red nuclear return to office buttons. thinking that will fix the problem.

Stuart Elliott (34:45)

Right.

Scott McInnes (34:46)

That will not fix the problem. Just in case anyone's wondering, we need to actually spend the time and take the time and make the effort to make this work because Pandora's box has been opened. We like hybrid working. I don't care what anybody says. Is it impacting people's businesses? If it is, you absolutely bring them back. But work out why it's being impacted first and work out is it hybrid working or is it something else? Have we done enough to make hybrid working work? We were working the other way. 9 to 5, Mondays to Friday for a hundred years up until March 20th, 2020.

Stuart Elliott (35:17)

Yeah.

Scott McInnes (35:18)

We've been working this way for three years, three measly years. And we wonder why we haven't got it quite right yet. Well, because we've only been doing it for three years. So it'll just take time to bed in. Silos and structures, always a challenge for connection, know, a lack of understanding, a lack of empathy for what another team does, because possibly back to the busyness challenge, we don't take the time to go and find out. what's going on with other teams to work out why, you know, Jim never rings me back whenever, he never rings me back whenever I ring him. Well, when do you ring him? Well, on a Thursday morning generally. Yeah, but he works in finance and we have a weekly payroll and Thursday mornings like the day. So no wonder he never calls you back. I never knew that. Okay, because we've never asked, because we never create the opportunity for that connection to have that understanding of what other people's roles are. Leadership, back to what we spoke about earlier on. Leadership's influence on connection is really strong. So if you've got a leader who's really, really strong at this stuff, you get a great experience. If you haven't, you don't. Very simple. Digital. We've got more channels than ever before. We are the most digitally connected people. Does that mean we're connected on a human level? Absolutely not. Doesn't mean that we've got more information coming at us that we have to sort through ourselves and work out what's important and what's not. Absolutely. That really important message I saw, I must go back and look at again. When I'm looking for again, was that in Teams? Was it in Slack? Was it online? Was it on the intranet? Was it in WhatsApp? Was it in, was it in, was it in? And that's not just in our work life, that's in our home life as well. Think about how many WhatsApp groups you're in. Ding, ding, ding, ding, ding. And it's a killer.

Stuart Elliott (36:53)

Absolutely. But not only that, the voice notes, the voice notes now that are stuck that become a sort of trend.

Scott McInnes (36:59)

Yeah.

Stuart Elliott (36:59)

Like I was talking literally talking to someone this morning about it and saying that's really hard for me because I can't see it. So I have to listen to it to then unwind what you're saying. And then I can't reference it. So it's you're absolutely right in terms of the number of ways of communicating now. It's just it exponentially increased.

Scott McInnes (37:17)

Yeah, absolutely. And that takes time from us as well. And it takes load on our brains to process all this stuff going on all the time, which brings us back to we're too busy, whether that be in a work life or a personal life. And the last one then is generational. We've got four generations in the workplace, maybe five if you're counting some of the 16 year olds now that are coming into the workplace as apprentices, for example. So that's hard. And each of those groups wants different things. My kids and lots of our kids, what do they do now? They go to the gym all the time. That fitness is really important to them. That's where they get their thing. We used to get our thing from going for few pints on a Thursday evening. They don't want to do that. I'm being generalising. Generally, we see patterns that the people that want to do that are the people that maybe of my age, because that's what we've done always. That's not what they want. So we've got a challenge as well of, what does good connection look like? What is it you want? What do you want us to do? What do we need to put in place? How can we work best? And how do we do that? We do that through conversation. And what we'll do is we'll actually both those research reports, we'll put those up. We've actually built a page for you, www.inspiringchange.ie/hrinsights So there's a page there that'll reference this conversation and then. We've got the research reports up there too, so it's just one-stop shop for people to get hold of that.

Stuart Elliott (38:43)

Just referencing back to the companies that are sort of saying, Look, we're all back in the office now, this is how it's gonna be. D' you think they're doing it from a sort of ease of just you either rule yourself in or rule yourself out and that way they try and solve a problem slightly by doing that?

Scott McInnes (38:56)

Partly, think maybe it's ego. think if I'm being honest, it's the ego of walking around my office and there being a hundred people sitting there in front of me. I wonder, it lack of trust? I wonder, is it financial that people are paying for these massive office spaces and they're on 25 year leases from the year 2020 and they're half full now. So, think there's a number of reasons and yeah, I think it's probably a mix of all those things and other reasons.

Stuart Elliott (39:28)

Yeah. I can definitely see a see a little bit of that in if I was paying for an office space, you said then think if it's not it's a bit like renting a house, isn't it? If you rent a flat, you want to make sure you use it. So if you suddenly reflect back over a year and realise you've only used it once a month, you probably don't think it's worth the value for money. Like there's that is quite a logical thought process.

Scott McInnes (39:48)

Yeah, but I would argue that bringing people back in for that reason is not a good enough reason. And look, it's reasonably easy here. I'm half an hour into the office, so it's easy for me. But if I'm coming from down in the country, or if I live in London and I'm an hour and a half or two hour commute each way each day, I can actually be using that for other stuff that makes me a better, more productive,

higher performing member of your team. So what do you want? Do you want a bum on the seat? Or do you want a high performing team member?

Stuart Elliott (40:19)

Yeah.

Scott McInnes (40:20)

I don't think those two things are mutually exclusive by the way. But again, two ends of a spectrum. So yeah, the right answer is probably somewhere in the middle.

Stuart Elliott (40:28)

I agree. It's interesting you talk about socialising versus like things like gym and fitness and going to the pub and things. It's interesting. Part of the thing I think about the pub is the fact that it just sparked up more you mentioned communication, it sparked up more conversation. So it wasn't sometimes it's not necessarily about the drink, it's the fact that it enabled increasing conversation. Whereas it's very difficult for 20 of you to go to the gym together and then have a conversation. Like you just don't do that. So it's that's one of the things that I think did happen a lot more. But I The stigma of the pub is different. However, it sparked a conversation and it meant that information was moving around the room.

Scott McInnes (41:06)

Yeah, yeah, yeah, absolutely. And even, and you're absolutely spot on because I see my kids go into the gym and what are they wearing? Headphones. So even if their pals, even if their pals are in the gym with them, they're just in the same physical space. They're not connected. They're listening to their own music, their own podcast, their own whatever. They're not connected. And don't get me wrong, the pub isn't the answer. The pub is part of an answer, a social construct for people getting together. But actually the right answer is creating opportunities for connection, creating opportunities for conversation. And in a work context, maybe that's about doing onboarding better. So that if you and I work in two different countries in an organisation, actually we've been brought together for a week of proper onboarding so that we know each other, so that I can ring you up and we know what we look like. We've met each other, we've had coffee together, we've gone for a walk together, we've had conversations about our kids or whatever. But we have that connection before we go off to our respective countries or departments or divisions. So doing better there is important. Creating opportunities in the workplace where we used to have them just naturally because we were in the office and now we don't.

So we do have to kind of create those things, but we do those in partnership with the people that we work with back to the kind of generational thing because people want different things. So, you know, I think we need to just be a little bit more thoughtful, back to that word intentional. about creating opportunities which we kind of took for granted before and probably one other thing to layer in there as well is just the capability and the ability of people to learn. So new people coming into the organisation and you and I sure when we joined organisations the first time we were sitting next to the older guys and the older girls and they were doing the job we were just learning by osmosis. Could we were listening in and we're hearing what a really tough client call sounded like and how that person handled it and can i sit in on that meeting. We just don't get those opportunities as much anymore. So we have to think about how do we create that for people new that are coming in.

Stuart Elliott (43:09)

Yeah, I no I can completely agree, is it's equally important. I want to talk about measuring culture. Cause I know a lot of people do struggle with this, I suppose, because they base it either on individual

performance, sometimes I suppose commercial outcomes, whether the business is doing well, etc. How do you, I suppose, how is it best to measure it? What are the best ways of doing that?

Scott McInnes (43:30)

So I think there's a qualitative and a quantitative and the correct answer is both, a mix of the two.

Stuart Elliott (43:35)

Right. Okay.

Scott McInnes (43:37)

We'll often, in fact, we just put in two response to proposals for culture audits from government departments here in Ireland this week. And we'll go in first and we'll say to them, well, great, let's work out where you wanna be first. So what is that culture ambition? And then we'll say, fine, let's work out where you are today. And that's the audit. And that is the measure. we'll go, we're a global partner of Denison's. Denison is a 30 year old model for measuring culture across 12 different traits, 48 statements, which gives you a really nice picture of what your culture is today. And if we think about culture being that, as I said earlier, that aligned kind of values and behaviours, processes and systems, are we all pulling the same way? Do we have a strong and aligned culture? So we would often go out, do a survey, and it might be culture AMP. or it might be great place to work or it might be whoever. We just partnered with Denison.

The key thing is to get a broad brush idea of what's going on in the organisation and then slice that by team, by division, by tenure, by level, by grade to understand what's happening in the organisation. Denison does a really nice thing with heat maps where across each of those four areas and across the statements, you can actually see red and green so you can compare teams and divisions and see where it's working well and where perhaps it isn't working quite so well. And then we would take that data and go off and get groups together. So give us, give us 10 groups of people selected from across the organisation. If you're super hierarchical, give us them by grade because people might not be willing to open up and speak honestly and openly in front of the boss's boss. So we'll then take that insight and we'll come back with a report with recommendations based on well, what, what is it your culture is today based on the qual insight and the quant insight. and we'll come back with some thoughts and questions and recommendations. actually anybody who says you can't measure culture, that's just completely untrue.

Stuart Elliott (45:29)

Ha ha.

Scott McInnes (45:30)

You categorically can. What is culture? Culture is an outcome of you doing the things that you do. So we don't make culture better. We don't improve culture specifically. We improve the things that we do and the outcome is a stronger and more aligned culture in our organisation. So we improve. how we live values, we improve performance management, we improve pulling people up and having difficult conversations when they go against the behaviours, we improve empowerment and accountability and customer service and all of those things that make our organisations our organisations. But then we track how well those changes are happening with pulse surveys over time and then full surveys every now and again. And we do paint a picture and we have done it. and we do it for clients where we've done it year on year and we've seen the numbers move based on things that have happened in their organisation. yeah, it's really, really interesting to see.

Stuart Elliott (46:28)

Yeah, and do you propose that people do measure it year on year? Is that what you think is good measurement or is it more real time now?

Scott McInnes (46:36)

Yeah, so there are a couple of platforms that we'll look at real time for sure. What are you, the happiness index, how are you feeling today? That kind of question, which is only one angle for me, one lens.

Stuart Elliott (46:43)

Yeah.

Scott McInnes (46:44)

What we would often say to clients is best practice is often to do a full survey. Like you think about organisational culture change takes three to five years. If you want to fundamentally change your culture, it could take up to five years. So do a full survey, get the line in the sand, get the benchmark of where you are today, and then perhaps do a pulse survey. So just go back and ask questions about the areas you've decided to focus on when it comes to change. Maybe you do that in year two and then in year three do a full survey again. And in that way you start to build up a picture of what's going on over a period of time. And it's really funny. People will say to us, we can't measure culture. And we'll say you can and we'll get the project and we'll go in and do it for them. And we bring back the results and they look and they go, yep.

Stuart Elliott (47:31)

Ha ha.

Scott McInnes (47:33)

Yeah, I'm looking at the numbers and I'm looking at that departmental spread and I'm thinking, exactly what I'd have thought. Yep, really struggling here, doing a really good job there. Yeah, it's really interesting. Yeah, our longer tenured people are struggling, our newer ones aren't because they're all, you know, happy bouncy bunnies in the organisation for the first year. And yeah, it's amazing when you actually play it back. There's just lots of kind of nodding heads and yeah, yeah, thanks.

Stuart Elliott (47:56)

Yeah, yeah.

Scott McInnes (47:58)

We've just put down on paper what we suspected.

Stuart Elliott (48:00)

That's really that's really interesting. And then if we look ahead, if we look to the future and we see lots of different challenges, we've talked about some of the current, I suppose, things to think about. But if we look ahead, I suppose trying to build a strong connected culture over the next few years, what are what are gonna be the biggest challenges in order to do that?

Scott McInnes (48:20)

Yeah, I think getting, not to go back over all ground too much, but I think getting our heads and arms around this how we work thing is going to be really, really important because I don't realistically think we're going back to five days in the office. Maybe it'll be three. So we've got to think about how we make that work really, really well. I think we've got the more, and people don't really think about this stuff, but for me, the more kind of global socio-economic impact of what's going on in the world. And of course, you and I and our organisations or anybody really in the organisation can't control what's going on in Gaza or what's going on in Iran or everything going on in America at the moment, know, Mauritius being in lockdown because a policeman ran over a lady on the road. We can't control any of those things. What we can do is we can be cognisant of and aware of the fact that these things are happening and making sure that we look after our people. because although we're not directly impacted, sorry, I'll take that back. Some of us are directly impacted by what's going on in some of these regions at the moment with some things that are going on.

Stuart Elliott (49:27)

Yeah.

Scott McInnes (49:28)

We're not all directly impacted, but we kind of are. I always see it as like a hum in the background that's constantly going on. And we've got to be aware that people are perhaps struggling with this stuff, even if they're not directly impacted. So I think the socioeconomic thing is really big. I think the fact that we know that managers are so fundamentally important yet we continue to not help and support them be brilliant is a real watch point for organisations. It's a really big one. And I think that's something that we've got to really get hold of by the scruff of the neck and do something about really, really critical, really critical.

Stuart Elliott (50:05)

Yeah. And the very last question from my side. We mentioned AI. Do you think AI is gonna impact company culture in the in the foreseeable future?

Scott McInnes (50:16)

I think that depends on if organisations decide it's going to or not. think if we can be very, if we can be back to the intentional word, if we can be very intentional about the culture that we want, taking into account the AI is going to be part of that picture.

Stuart Elliott (50:17)

Right.

Scott McInnes (50:18)

I remember on our own podcast, we had the head of people experience from HubSpot on there, Imer Marinan, brilliant. And I had a chat with her and she said, you know, the challenge is that, you know, I've got people in the office on my team, you know, if I'm on a team call, I've got people in the office, I've got people not in the office, and of course I've got our AI agent colleagues. And I went, what? You've got what?

Stuart Elliott (50:55)

Yeah.

Scott McInnes (50:56)

And she went, well, our AI agent colleagues come on the calls with us. And I'm like, but they're not real. And she went, well, yeah, I know, but they still join our calls and they listen in and they contribute. And that was like mind blowing, absolutely mind blowing. So we've got to think about that too, because those people in inverted commas, they can work 24 seven, three, six, five. just keep going and keep going and keep going. we've got to think about what place we want, and I'm not an AI expert, we've got to think about what place we want AI to have in our organisations. And we've got to think about our culture within that context. I spoke about the context earlier on, impacting culture. AI is part of that context now, the context that our organisations now live and work in and subsist in. it's going to be an interesting journey.

Stuart Elliott (51:42)

It is gonna be yet another challenge that I think we're gonna have to run through. But look, I'm looking at the clock, I know we've run out a little bit of time now. So I just want to sort of thank say thank you for all of your time today, Scott. It's been really lovely to talk to you and hear about different challenges and look, culture is so interesting when you talk to organisations about this. if anyone wants to get in touch with you, what's the best way to reach you?

Scott McInnes (52:08)

So as I said, we have that page on the website, www.inspiringchange.ie/hrinsights And on there, you'll find details of this conversation, the two research reports we'll put up there, but we'll also put up, there's a calendar there if anybody wants to get in touch with me or sit down and have a conversation about your challenges. So yeah, all of that there on that page, www.inspiringchange.ie/hrinsights

Stuart Elliott (52:33)

Perfect. And if anybody wants to get hold of me and get them put in touch with Scott, my email is se@elliotscotthr.com. But just want to say another big thank you for your time today. Cheers. Thanks Scott.

Scott McInnes (52:42)

Thank you very much, Esther. I really, really enjoyed the chat.

Stuart Elliott (52:45)

Awesome. Thank you.

Stuart Elliott (52:47)

Thank you so much for listening to today's show. A big thank you for Scott for joining me and sharing his insights into organisational culture and the importance of building stronger connections in the workplace. If you have any questions at all, or if you want to get in touch and talk in more detail about this, please do contact me on se@elliotscotthr.com. Thanks ever so much.