

The Future of Work podcast is a weekly show where Jacob has in-depth conversations with senior level executives, business leaders, and bestselling authors around the world on the future of work and the future in general. Topics cover everything from AI and automation to the gig economy to big data to the future of learning and everything in between. Each episode explores a new topic and features a special guest.

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Jacob Morgan: Hello, everyone. Welcome to another episode of the future of work podcast. My guest today is Elena Donio, the CEO of Axiom. Elena, thanks for joining me.

Elena Donio: You bet. Thanks for having me.

Jacob Morgan: So for people that are not familiar with Axiom maybe you can give us a little bit of context around the company, how many people do you guys have, and what do you guys do.

Elena Donio: Sounds great. Axiom's been around for about 17 years and the company was originally founded under the premise [00:00:30] that legal work for the corporate world was done in a way that was highly inefficient, ineffective. Where both sides of the value exchange often times walked away dissatisfied and that meant that on the client side, and on the lawyer side. And so the company was founded around the idea that there was a way to create a business model that's disrupted the trappings of big law.

And so free from the pyramidal infrastructure of [00:01:00] the law firm from the space and the capital infrastructure of the law firm. It was possible to put really good lawyers to work on really great assignment with really great clients, but to do it at 50 to 70% less than what clients were experiencing in the law firm, and so the company was started with this idea that we would amass a large number of talented lawyers that wanted to work on an engagement by engagement [00:01:30] basis, i.e. gigs, and that they would do that because of the great clients that we could bring to bear, and the great work that we could bring to bear.

And 17 years later, we're about 2000 people. We service over half of the Fortune 100 and a lot of the Fortune 500 and global 2000. We operate across about 15 commercial offices, three delivery centers for large scale contracting work, and the business has just grown and scaled in [00:02:00] an explosive way ever since it start back in the early 2000s. Today we've added a bunch of capabilities so while we still put a lot of attorneys to work on really exciting and engaging assignments, we also are pushing at the future of the content of that law work as well.

And so digging into contracts, utilizing artificial intelligence, machine learning to pull out specific clauses, and really sort of calling in to question [00:02:30] the idea of what contractual work ought to look like in the future and that's something we're doing enmass for large clients as well.

Jacob Morgan: Very cool. I'm definitely going to ask you about the automation stuff in a few minutes, but I wrote a story about how you actually ended up joining because you used to be the president of Concur and I understand there's a story about a red envelop so I would love to hear that because I thought that was really interesting so can you share that?

Elena Donio: Absolutely. [00:03:00] I spent 18 years of my career at Concur and it was a marvelous journey. My little startup was acquired in 1998. I came to Concur right before the IPO in late 1998 and played a variety of roles there up until the acquisition of Concur by SAP. At that time I became president of the business, and ran it from within SAP which was also a fantastic part of the journey, and was really having a great time [00:03:30] there actually, and doing some amazing things.

We were getting into China and expanding our commercial capability, and expanding our global partnerships. Things that had it been on the radar and been on the list of to-dos for many years, but we never had the capacity to do and SAP really changed the game for us in investing in a way that we could, I think become the best version of ourselves at Concur and so I wasn't actually looking for a new job, but I knew at some point [00:04:00] that I wanted to be a CEO.

I knew that there were leadership muscle that I wanted to flex. There were things I wanted to do and lessons I wanted to leave behind for the next generation and in a conversation with a friend of mine about halfway through the journey as president of Concur, she said to me if you can do it, you have to. And I just decided you know what, she's right. I have something I'm supposed to leave to the next generation and it's this idea that [00:04:30] these roles are doable and they're accessible and you can be a whole person and have many dimensions to you as a human being, and as a leader.

And I just really wanted to get into that seat eventually but I didn't have a lot of ... would be what industry, what growth stage, and things like that. I was just starting to think about what life might look like as a CEO and what kinds of opportunities might be interesting [00:05:00] to me when the phone started ringing of course as it does in these positions and someone got my attention and it was Mark Harris, the founder and then CEO of Axiom.

And a couple of different individuals pointed me to Mark throughout the course of picking my head up and doing some research, and at one point I agreed to do a phone call because I wasn't sure that it [00:05:30] was going to be the right opportunity and the right industry and the right geography, but I agreed to do a phone call and about a week before that phone call is due to take place, Mark

called me and said hey, I'm just going to be in Seattle during that phone call, it'd be really weird if we were right across town, and we were talking on the phone. Why don't we just meet for breakfast, and so I said okay, we'll do an hour over breakfast.

We did that, and we spent the time talking about not [00:06:00] necessarily the business metrics and revenue and clients, we spent the time talking about culture and talking about values and talking about who we were and what we like to do with our time, and things ignited our passions, and it was just such a fun conversation, and I walked away feeling like this is someone that if the company, if he's representing the company.

If the company really feels like this individual, it could be a really interesting opportunity, and at the end of the meeting, he [00:06:30] pushed a red folder across the table, and it was kind of beat up, it was like a used folder. The top of it was crossed out, whatever was on it, I don't even remember. He said I know that in these moments you're looking for glimpses as to what the culture looks like, and who we are, and I know it's really hard when you're thinking about a CEO position especially in a confidential search which many of them are, to understand what.

You can't walk [00:07:00] the halls very easily. You can't meet a hundred people, and so I reached out to about 25 individuals in the company at all levels, people that I think represent who we are and I said to them that there was someone that I was meeting that I thought should maybe make the next chapter of their career happen at Axiom. And I asked them to answer the question, why they're spending this chapter of their career at Axiom.

Here are their answers, and I grabbed the folder. Our meeting was [00:07:30] coming to a close. I jumped back in my car. I ran back to the office. I didn't think too much about it until that folder kept staring at me from my car seat, and then it made its way into my home office and probably four or five days later I finally sat down and opened it up, and started reading these amazing letters from people at Axiom.

They were funny, and embarrassing, and real, and humble, and just I [00:08:00] read them and there were a couple that literally brought tears to my eyes, and I felt like these feel like people that I know. These feel like people that I've spent my career with. These feel like people that could easily be seating across the table from me at Concur, and it was in reading the letters in that folder that led me to agree to the next meeting, and the next meeting.

They were sort of this seminal moment around when you decide what you're going [00:08:30] to do in your life, one of the most important things is to make sure that you can identify with the human beings that you're going to spending all this time with. I felt that way at the time in reading their stories and I haven't looked back. I'm 18 months in now and it's been a really really fun ride, and I have to tell you those stories really were real.

Jacob Morgan: I love that he didn't come out with we're going to give you this much money. This is how much the company is going to grow. He appealed to [00:09:00] the human side of stories of why people work there. I think probably we forget about that all the time. Even not just when we're attracting executives, but just any kind of employee, we're always trying to pitch companies growing, you're going to be a part of something exciting but we rarely I think spend enough time looking at here's the people who work here. Here's why they work here. Here are their human stories, something that you can relate to. I guess in this case, it was quite effective.

Elena Donio: [00:09:30] No question, and in fact, it's funny because I think when people say what they want to do on the other side of that equation. They'll say, well, I want growth. I want income capacity. I want leadership experiences, and things like that but I think you're right that seldom is it that side of things that we remember about what really characterize the chapter of our career. I think what you remember is kind of who you did it with and what it felt like [00:10:00] to achieve all of those amazing successes, and to navigate what at times are so colossal failures, and I certainly been part of some of those as well.

Jacob Morgan: I had a podcast guest not too long ago, whose name was Thomas Gilovich, and he's a psychologist, and he did this pretty interesting research project where he looked at how satisfaction levels are impacted depending on if you buy a physical good or an experience, and he found that over time, if you buy a physical good, your [00:10:30] satisfaction goes down. But over time, if you invest in an experience your satisfaction goes up.

And I think your story clearly shows that in this case, it was the experience that matters, and it's the experience that a lot of employees care about, so thank you for sharing that. I'm also a little bit curious to learn a little bit more about you. One of the things that listeners are always really really curious to learn more about is the podcast guest. So [00:11:00] what does a day look like for you, how do you spend your day, what time are you waking up in the morning, do you have any routines, or rituals that you practice on a regular basis?

Elena Donio: I do. I do, and it's funny. I'm always curious to hear those stories about other executives as well because one of the things that you think sets me apart is around something that where I'm really different. I sleep a lot. I hear so many guest say like, I do this, and I do that, and I'm thinking, [00:11:30] I'm still asleep at four. That's my little secret. I'm a good sleeper but I think it does help. I have a lot of energy during the day, but that comes with a real commitment and dedication to being shut off for a number of hours every day.

But I would see my day starts usually around 6, 6:30, and I try to get exercise every morning. It's a huge part of my [inaudible 00:11:54]. It's important that I get a really hard workout and around at [00:12:00] least five or so days a week. And then on the days that I'm not doing a hard workout in the morning. I'm usually doing a walk with the dog or a run with the kids or something like that.

On a work day, I think about it in terms of the average week versus the average day. Because the average day is always so different. But I break it down into a couple of different categories. I typically will get up and just make sure that there's nothing urgent that's coming over night from Europe or if I'm in Europe from the US [00:12:30] or Asia. And take care of that, get to the gym. I love soul cycle. If I don't go to soul cycle, I'll go to yoga or do a run outside.

Then it's about getting ready for getting into the office, and in whatever geography I'm in. I try to make sure that my and week are characterized by a series of in person one on ones small group meetings. I do a lot of skip level meetings to understand what [00:13:00] the vibe is in the business. What people are struggling with and what things are going well.

Jacob Morgan: So what's a skip level meeting for people that are not familiar with it?

Elena Donio: Sorry, it's meeting with the directs of my directs or just giving a couple levels down into the organization understanding what individuals are doing, what they're crackling with. I try to meet with a lot of up and coming leaders, individuals that are mid-career and shouldering a lot of the day to day work of the business. So that's what I mean by that.

[00:13:30] And then board and investor calls, press calls, and things like that, so in any given week, I color code my calendar so that I know what's internal, what's team oriented, what's client oriented, what's board or investor oriented, what's press oriented, so I can ensure over time that the balance of my time, when you can kind of see it in snapshot view, that I can see that the balance of my time is lining up against what I believe are the biggest priorities.

My biggest priorities [00:14:00] are about growing the company. Making sure that we're introducing ourselves to as many new clients as we can and making sure we're taking care of our existing clients, that we're innovating, and that we're making sure that Axiom is and continues to be a really wonderful place to work. A place that we would be proud to have our children and friends come work at. And I want to make sure that my time is allocated across those things in a way that makes that based on where we're going.

Jacob Morgan: [00:14:30] How much of your time do you think is devoted to, well, I suppose part of it is a lot of people still try to understand what the role of a CEO is. It used to be that the CEO was just this person at the top of the company. They make the decisions. They tell everyone else what to do. But more and more when I talk to CEOs and executives such as yourself, I find that more of their job is shifting towards this human engaging people, motivating people, find out what's going on.

[00:15:00] It's not so much about delegating command and control and making the decisions as much as it is more of this human stuff. I don't know if you would agree with that or not, but I'd be curious to hear what you think.

Elena Donio:

Yeah, I do agree with that and as I think about how my time is allocated. A lot of it is around what I would broadly call communications. And we're really a distributed workforce, and that actually comes I think in part from our heritage of [00:15:30] the work that we do itself that we have 1400, 1500 attorneys that are operating out of all over the world, out of home offices, out of client offices.

And the way that I think Axiom's work style has evolved is that we're also pretty distributed. We've got our 15 offices, but we're also we've got people spread around the world in home offices. We've got people out at client sites off and on throughout every day of the week. What that means [00:16:00] is it puts a premium on finding new and creative and interesting ways to stay connected.

And so a lot of what I spend my time thinking about is exactly that, it's a how do I make sure that what we're doing in a leadership level is understood, that people understand our priorities and our strategy, and that we're operating against that. But the equally we have information bubbling up from all other areas of the business and that we've really [00:16:30] got our listening post up everywhere and so we do a lot of things related to making sure that we're hearing that vibe, and the pulse, and there's couple examples that we do.

First of all, we do something called a huddle about every other month. We do about five to six of them a year, and it's an opportunity for us to do streaming live video across the company and it's not just a bunch of executives talking about what we're up to [00:17:00] in our latest accomplishments. We feature something interesting going on in the business at all levels in every one of those huddles, and so we'll have people showcase a really interesting client story or showcase something that we're doing around learning and development or showcase something that we're doing across our attorney talent pool.

And we'll do little fireside chat style Q&A sessions, and I think we learned more number one based on the people that are speaking at [00:17:30] those events, but also the questions that come in just give you such a great flavor for how the business is feeling, what they're thinking, what's on their mind. And so I really see the role of CEO, one of the most important parts of it is in opening up the two way dialog across leadership and the business but also leadership in the client, leadership in the industry, and making sure that those channels are open. An enormous [00:18:00] part of where I spent my time, but also something that I really want to make sure that as leaders we're all doing up and down the business.

Jacob Morgan:

You mentioned earlier at the podcast something about challenges and failures that you had. And you said you had a bunch of those and some really big ones. Are you able to share any of those big failures that you've had and how you had to overcome those or huge obstacles that you were faced with and how to overcome those?

Elena Donio:

Yeah. Yeah, I'll tell a story from much earlier [00:18:30] in my career if that's okay.

Jacob Morgan: Of course.

Elena Donio: I started my career in consulting, and I right out of school I went to Accenture and then Deloitte. I learned to write code in COBOL. I was really kind of a product person early on and when I went to a startup in Palo Alto with a couple of friends of mine. I was doing everything. Wearing a bunch of different hats. I was the first real employee of the startup.

We built a little e-procurement application and [00:19:00] then the company was acquired very early on by Concur because Concur's vision was to take its roots in expense reporting and add additional employee facing applications to the suite and so they've purchased the company that I was at called seven software with the little e-procurement app and then we purchased another company several months later that had a human resource self-service app.

In many ways, this employee desktop or suite [00:19:30] of solutions idea was, I think a little bit before its time. It pre-dated mobility and really ubiquity in online web-based apps and things like that. Really nice idea but really tough to execute at the time given capital constraints as well as where technology was at the time. After the company went public in 1998, we hit a couple of hard quarters where we miss Wall Street expectations [00:20:00] and had to really dig deep around who we were, who we wanted to be, what we could afford to do, and not do.

As part of that, one of the first things that company decided was to shut down the product I had spent the last couple of years building. We just hadn't been able to take flight with that product. It was harder to sell to a different buyer than the buyer that was buying expense reporting. It was requiring too much capital to build out what we needed to [00:20:30] build. The technical requirements for expanding these large Fortune 500 companies had big heavy demands of us that we weren't able to meet.

It was just really really tough time and I agreed with the decision to shut it down but it was enormously painful. We had to say goodbye to some really good friends. Some fantastic developers, some fantastic salespeople, and really at that time I had the choice to either [00:21:00] stay and switch products and work on the expense product and run product management for that part of the business or leave and commit myself to the future of e-procurement.

I ultimately decided that there was something that really appealed to me about the people and the opportunity and we were making the decision at the time to begin to trend toward what we now know as a SaaS development and delivery model, [00:21:30] economic model. At the time we called it application service provider model, ASP. And I felt like there was a lot of promise in that, in the idea that eventually applications would be delivered over the web and subscribed to versus installed via CD on corporate intranets, and the economic model would match that distribution model.

That was intriguing to me, and so I did decide to stay and [00:22:00] we built the company backup from what was a low of I think \$0.28 stock price to being sold to SAP for \$8.3 billion. But in those really dark moments, it took everything we had to continue to believe and to continue to bring people along with us. In fact, I remember a really, just a really seminal moment in that where an individual that I had hired that we ask to stay [00:22:30] on board came into my office one morning.

When all of this was going on, we're in the middle of layoffs and shutting down what was at that time two years of our life's work. And she said I don't know how you're getting up in the morning and pasting a smile on your face, because I can't stand it, I can't handle it. I don't know how you're doing this. How are you doing this? And my answer was something I thought a lot about since, and it was that I'm not playing for any [00:23:00] given line of code that we write or any given piece of software that we're distributing or any given win or loss from a sales perspective.

Show me a company that's not willing to shut things down and say no more and make the really really hard decisions and I'll show you a company that is so conservative and had such a perfectionist mindset, [00:23:30] and so filled with a bunch of people that aren't taking risks. That's just not the kind of place I want to work, and so if we're going to continue to innovate and evolve, we have to be able to say goodbye to the things that just didn't work, and it's not personal, it's just business. But this is the kind of place I want to be.

Jacob Morgan:

How do you deal with those tough situations? You said you had to say goodbye to a lot of people, you had to abandon a lot of the work that you were doing [00:24:00] and for some people obviously it's hard to know when to say goodbye and when to keep going through things. How do you know when it's time to say goodbye to something and when it's time to keep going with something? And how do you personally deal with those really tough times of going through layoffs and having to make those really really hard decisions that I'm sure are very very painful?

Elena Donio:

I think there is no easy answer, [00:24:30] and that every situation is a little bit different, but I try to keep a couple things in mind. Number one is that there are a series of things that you're thinking about delivering something new that ought to just be part of the discipline, and so the check points where we're going to hold each other accountable, if by X amount of time we haven't seen X type of traction. We're not going to move forward.

And to have some stage gates [00:25:00] is what we call them and some criteria that allows us to objectively say, well, we didn't hit A, B, or C requirement and it's time to make a change. That doesn't always mean shutting something down. It might mean a different kind of strategy. It might mean refining pricing, it might mean refining packaging, it might mean some leadership change. But to have criteria and to be as data oriented as possible I think is one important philosophy.

There are sometimes [00:25:30] when all the data in the world is not going to help so for example in this situation you could have easily argued that well, we just need more time. And if we can just carve out a little bit more time and a little bit more investment, I think we can make it work. It would have been very easy to say that, but I also think there's a real premium on focus, and so in these really hard moments. If you can on the white board layout the number of things you're trying to accomplish, [00:26:00] the number of items that you've got competing for attention of the corporation in the entire leadership team.

It becomes a little bit easier to see which things are the outliers and to even just have the list helps people see just how many things are competing for attention at the same time, and I even see that at Axiom today when I came on board. There's a series of four or five or six things that we were innovating around and we've got that down to two or three [00:26:30] now, and I'm not sure if two or three are right. We're always assessing that and determining how many things, how many big ticket things can compete for our attention in any given moment.

And so those are some of the things that, and strategies that I use to navigate that. I think when you do decide because I think the other part of your question is okay you've decided. There's something you've got to say goodbye to. There's some really hard message that's got to get out there. I always come back to just thinking [00:27:00] through how I would want to be communicated with.

What kind of strategy and plan and process would I want to be on the other side of as an individual contributor or as a client and just being really willing to have the hardest of hard conversations. There are many times through the course of my career where I haven't wanted to but I have literally gotten myself on a plane to go sit down with a client or a team member to have [00:27:30] the conversation in person and to let the person down in a way that I can feel really good about.

Those things tend to take extra time, people will say, well that just won't scale. We can't do it that way. This has to be broader, and I will always be on the side of personal touch and face to face contact in those moments.

Jacob Morgan:

Which is great, that human aspect is something that we need definitely much more of inside of companies. [00:28:00] And I like that you make it harder for yourself, and you make yourself more uncomfortable so that it's easier for your employees, and I think often times the opposite is true. We try to make our employees uncomfortable so that we as leaders and executives can have it a little bit easier so I like the opposite approach which make sense.

What is it like to work at Axiom? So obviously most people listening to this have probably never stepped foot into an Axiom headquarters or to an office. [00:28:30] So maybe you can give us a sense of what it's like to work there, everything from office design, leadership styles, perks, benefits, any unique practices that you do like your huddles. Just to give us an auditory I guess tour through Axiom.

Elena Donio:

Yeah. So I'll break it down into a couple different spaces. So if you're in a corporate function at Axiom and so these are people, they're in sales, they're marketing [00:29:00] that are in R&D building solutions that are in client service and support, and then I'll talk separately about our attorney population that are out servicing our clients day to day, but if you're in a corporate function at Axiom.

You probably sit in one of our 15 offices day to day but they're really built around the idea that the space should be fun and engaging and interesting, and it's not necessarily a place where you're going to be all day everyday. [00:29:30] I think that our team members really appreciate the idea that they might be in the New York office one day, the San Francisco office a week later.

And then it feels like it has some local personality but that it also really feels truly Axiom and what I mean by that is open floor plans, really fun interesting design. There's a lot of orange, and a lot of smiling faces. There's [00:30:00] a lot of great art. There's books everywhere. We're not really big on huge employee perks in the office but we do have a number of snacks and drinks and things to just keep you going throughout the day, but it's not the place where you're going to come and have breakfast, lunch, and dinner, because we expect you to be there all day every day.

I really believe that the highest performers are people that have really rich and full lives, and [00:30:30] so the idea isn't to reward people to be in and sitting at a desk all day long by any means. We do a bunch of things like I mentioned earlier to stay connected, the huddle is one. We do poll surveys and things like that to see where people are at and how they're doing. We host a lot of happy hours in the business.

For our attorney population, sometimes clients come in and speak on a variety of educational topics. We do trivia nights relatively regularly out [00:31:00] of our office. We celebrated pride month in New York just last week with an LGBT trivia night which was a lot of fun. In fact, I've done a couple of trivia nights over the last year, and I tend to do really well at the ones that are related to '80s music and not as well on the ones that are current pop culture though I'm trying.

I've got three boys, and they're trying to keep me up to date. There are things like that that we do. When you think about our attorney population or the [00:31:30] individuals that are out there servicing our clients day to day and doing the good work of our clients. About two-thirds of them on any given day are working at a client site, and about a third of them on any given day are working out of a home office.

I think that really speaks to changes in the population, and in work styles and the distributed nature of our work. We might have an individual in one jurisdiction doing work [00:32:00] for an organization and another. Because they've got really great experience in IP law or trade, import/export law. We

think that's a really interesting trend and something that we look forward, continuing to lean right into. Because if we can create and tap into a much broader network of attorney talent. We have the opportunity to solve client problems at a much greater scale.

Jacob Morgan: Very cool, and I like that you mentioned that [00:32:30] you don't have crazy perks in there so you're not trying to create a Google. I'm actually curious to hear your take on why, because sometimes I talk to organizations and they'll tell me about free breakfast, lunch, dinner, and massages. Just like the Pinocchio's island of workspaces. But you are not so much a believer in going crazy there so why not?

Elena Donio: I think there's a couple of big things. One is I think the employee [00:33:00] experience is really characterized by the quality and complexion of the work and the people that they find themselves surrounded by. And so I think to the extent we're getting those things right, that the work is really engaging and fun and meaningful and interesting, and that the people that we're surrounding ourselves with are fun and engaging and interesting and smart and creative.

That we're doing things as a company like giving [00:33:30] money back to our communities and that we have a focus on social responsibility, and that we have a focus on diversity and inclusion. All of those things required time and effort and they require capital. They require us to invest in those areas that really sort of create an environment of authenticity and of inclusion and I would much rather focus on those things than create an environment where you [00:34:00] know you're going to get fed all day, or you're going to get a massage when you need it.

I think it's a question of one, what you're playing for, and then two what you're putting your investment after because of that. I think every investment that we make as a company is a symbol of what we care about. We care about our employees and their experience very, very much but we choose to show that in a way that is more reflective [00:34:30] of our values, of inclusion, authenticity and things like that.

Jacob Morgan: There are not a lot of female CEOs in the world so I have to ask, what is it like being a female CEO? Anything particular that you noticed? We had Tim Ryan as a podcast guest. He's the chairman of PWC in the United States, and he's been a big crusader around [00:35:00] getting more women and more diversity involved in the workplace, and they were starting to see more action and attention being drawn around this.

But often times when I speak with female CEOs, they have different perspectives and different observations around what it's like to be a female executive, so I'd be curious to hear your take.

Elena Donio:

Well, first of all, I appreciate you asking that and I think that we need more. I said earlier in the conversation that someone said to me if you can do it, you have to, and that [00:35:30] really was purely a gender comment. That was hey, you're a woman that has the capacity and has gotten to this point. You have to keep going. You cannot stop, and that really resonates with me.

I feel this tremendous responsibility to keep going and to never be done. If I'm not sitting in this chair, I hope I'm still sitting on boards and mentoring and guiding and supporting and sponsoring young men and women everywhere but on a crusade [00:36:00] to continue to create more diversity in these seats, and one of the things I try to do is to make that really really accessible to feel like I'm a real person. That I'm a real human. That I have this really multi-faceted life.

A couple things, a couple observations I would make. Number one, I feel that I hit the jackpot at Concur in some ways because I was surrounded by a bunch of men [00:36:30] that believed in me. I hit the jackpot early in my life in the family I was born into, because I had a father that believed in me, and that pushed me all the time to get outside of my comfort zone and to aim really high.

He was convinced I could do things that I'm still not even convinced I could do. I heard from a very young age, you can be president of the United States. You can run a company. You can fly to the moon. And I'm not sure that it every truly sunk into that [00:37:00] level but I do think that it gave me enough courage to get out there and try and fail and then I've surrounded myself in my career with people that believed and allowed me the space to go in and try and fail, and help pick me up afterwards.

I think that when women talk to me about the discrimination that they suffer, that those little moments in conference rooms where they don't feel listened to, they feel [00:37:30] sidelines. I have remarkably feel of those moments. What I have had and what I have experienced from early in my career was this idea that looking up and looking around at the top seat in the number of companies and in the companies I was in very early in my career in consulting.

That there were so few women, number one, and number two, the ones that were at the top were people that I didn't want to emulate. They were [00:38:00] very single-dimensional. They maybe weren't married or they were divorced or they didn't have children or they worked all day and measured their impact in hours, and air miles, and that's just not who I am, and so for a long time I didn't find it all that appealing to be honest.

But there were couple moments through the course of my career that led me to believe that I could do it and that it was my job to do it a little bit differently so that it was [00:38:30] more appealing. I'll tell you a quick story about something that happened mid-career for me. And I had just come off of, I'm taking a year off. I hit the wall that a lot of women talk about where I had two really young kids, and was really just struggling to be the kind of leader that I wanted to be.

I was on the exec staff at Concur. I was struggling to be the kind of leader I wanted to be, the kind of mother I wanted to be, the kind of spouse I wanted to be. [00:39:00] My husband at the time was a GM at Microsoft, and also had a big job, and I just threw out my hands and said enough, I can't do it. Through the course of that time off, what I realized was that, I miss this. I miss work. I miss client, and innovation, and technology, and people, and getting out of bed every morning fired up to go in and solve problems and be surrounded by interesting and engaging human beings.

Not that my kids weren't that, but it's still [00:39:30] a little different when you're talking about a two year old and a four year old. I just got really restless toward the end of that. Did a couple consulting projects for Concur, and Raj Singh who was my boss at the time, president of the company. At the end of one of these projects I did for him. It was to write the business plan for the small and mid-market business at Concur.

I was handing over the business plan to him and saying okay, you need someone to go run this [00:40:00] and he said well, why don't you run it? I thought long and hard about it and never forget we had a breakfast meeting, and I sat him down, and I said all right, listen, I'm going to do this, but here's what it's going to look like. When I come back, I'm going to only work this much. I'm only going to travel this much. I'm only going to do this many trips per year, I'm going to, I need a team that looks like this. I need this kind of leadership infrastructure around me. I need this kind of [00:40:30] investment.

I'm going to be really balanced. I had this whole litany of really silly tactical things that I needed to say out loud to him and he just started laughing and looked at me across the table and said you know you're talking to yourself right now, not me, right? It was this moment where I realized that so much of this pressure I was putting on around air miles and time in front of clients and [00:41:00] the number of hours in the office and achieving through those kind of arbitrary measures were just coming from me.

They weren't coming from anyone else, and the minute I let go of that which is really nothing but practice, it's practice, practice, practice. It's everyday knowing that like if I'm leaving early because I've got a kid thing to go to, that's fine. What I realized is that that was the tone in the example that hundreds and hundreds of other women needed to see, [00:41:30] and they needed to see it emulated. They needed to see it done, so that they could believe that it was possible to have all the things that they wanted in life, and not have to sacrifice too tremendously.

To be able to stay in, and to be building the products that we all use every day. Making the decisions that impact us all everyday, and that's ultimately what we're striving for now.

Jacob Morgan:

I love that story of you're talking to yourself. I think that's a profound thing to think about. But some [00:42:00] people listening to this might say yeah, sure.

It's easy for her to say, she's an executive so she can demand certain things, she can ask for certain things but I'm an entry-level employee or I've just been at the company for a few months or a few years. How can I possibly have those conversations with my manager, with my boss?

How, if you're not in a position of power as far as being an executive, how do you begin to have those conversations? Has anybody have those conversations with you [00:42:30] while you've been the CEO of Axiom? I'd be really curious what advice you might have, and how you've dealt with those conversations if anybody's come to you with that.

Elena Donio:

Yeah, yeah, I feel like I have the zone where people come to me, and it's either right before or right after they're either going on maternity leave or coming back. That's the zone when people reach out and say, Elena, how do I do this? And I love having those conversations because there are so many moments and I think you're [00:43:00] hitting on exactly this where the managers around you just may not know, they may not have the life experience to be able to create the right kind of environment and to be empathetic in a way that we need them to be during those really hard moments, those wall hitting moments.

I give people a couple pieces of advice. The first thing I try to do is sit down and understand what they're trying to solve for because not everyone's trying to solve for the same thing. When I really sit [00:43:30] down with women at that stage in their careers, a lot of times I'm asking where do you need to see change in your life? Is it more time for yourself, is it more time for your child, is it more time to work and you're dealing a moment of guilt?

What problem is it that we really want to sit down and solve, and once I get through that and it turns out it's not a single thing. A lot of people are dealing with a bunch [00:44:00] of different things and then I try to get really tactical with them on okay what would feel good to you? What would feel sustainable? If we just said you're going to work from home on Fridays for the next six months.

Would that feel like another breath being added into your life that you could sustain? Are we really talking about saying no to a specific opportunity or specific assignment you're [00:44:30] being asked to do, and would that give you the space that you need to navigate this period of time, and I tried to get extremely extremely specific and then I'll brainstorm with them okay how are we going to go talk about that? How are we going to go have that conversation?

And I think when you get away from talking in really broad philosophical terms like well we need more work, flexible work arrangements, and you really get down [00:45:00] into okay what I'm really asking for is I want to be at home in the mornings and start my day at 10 and I'm willing to get home, get the baby fed, get dinner on the table, and then I'm willing to log back in.

You just realized that it's not necessarily a thing that has to be so big and so controversial, it can be some simple pivots and simple shifts in the way people [00:45:30] run their work day in their life, and then I try to work with managers to make sure that they're being really open-minded about those kinds of things. That if it's a policy that needs to be changed or procedure that needs to be changed, that they'd be really courageous about changing it, and then measure it, and if it's not working. Let's go back and revisit it.

9 times out of 10, I think we're able to meet in the right place and to create the right environment, and the other thing I tell people a lot both managers, people in positions [00:46:00] of authority and the individual contributors that might be hitting their own walls at certain times is that we should not think of our careers as a straight line up into the right. That it's really a continuum and there are moments when you're really in in such a big way and you're traveling and you're able to get in front of clients all the time, and you're on boards and you're doing philanthropic work.

And then there are times when really all you can do [00:46:30] is get through the day and get home to take care of a parent or a child or a spouse or whatever it is that needs you, and that's okay. These things don't have to be a straight line up into the right. It's a long game we're playing and being engaged in the work and in the economy and in leadership, and in innovation can help us get through all of those other moments as well. For me, it all comes back to not being [00:47:00] single dimensional and having a bunch of different things that make you whole.

Jacob Morgan:

I love those responses. Those are great, and the way that you articulated some of those challenges I think make a lot of sense and will probably resonate with a lot of people both men and women that are listening to this. I hate to get off this topic to switch gears a little bit but I know we only have a couple minutes left and I really wanted to ask you about this because you brought it up earlier in the discussion.

That was a conversation around automation and machine learning [00:47:30] and most research that you see out there today says that this will impact the law firms that's one of the hardest hit, everybody that's a lawyer is going to be in trouble or if you're a tax accountant, you're going to be in trouble. But I've talked to a lot of lawyers and a lot of, had the chairman of the board of the Seyfarth Law.

I spoke with their team, I spoke with the folks over at EY, just a lot of these organizations [00:48:00] that have lots and lots of lawyers to find out are they being negatively impacted? And all of them tell me the same thing that they are seeing actually a positive impact freeing up time for lawyers to focus on other things. They're not getting rid of people. So I'm really curious to hear your perspective on the impact that automation, machine learning, AI. All these things are going to have not just maybe for lawyers but it's kind of your broader take on what we're seeing too.

Elena Donio: [00:48:30] Yeah. I think it's a great question and it's something that we think about a lot at Axiom. When you think about, and people love to make these broad statements. It's the end of lawyers, it's the end of this profession, or that profession and I just really don't think that's true. I think where we're going is that technology will be really really assistive that it'll make us better at what we do.

Machines are getting really really good at pattern recognition. They're recognizing patterns [00:49:00] better than any humans in many use cases, and looking at contracts as a use case that we're very very committed to and familiar with. We review contracts on behalf of some of the world's largest clients for various different use cases that are interesting and important to them in the moment.

Whether it's understanding their commercial contracts or understanding what privacy statements might be in their contract so just to give you a recent and very important example. [00:49:30] It might be in understanding risk when they're going through an M&A transaction. When they're making an acquisition and we'd go in on behalf of our clients and we'll review tens of thousands of contracts at a time.

Pattern recognition, finding terms and pulling them out is something that AI can do a fantastic job of. We can pull out information about assignability clauses, notifications, indemnification, limitation on liability [00:50:00] and present that back to the client as data versus the poetic pros that you might be familiar with in a contract. That provides a ton of value but the premium here is on judgment and lawyers are fantastic at judgment.

It's what they went to school for, it's what they studied, it's what they enjoyed doing and it's what is most valuable about the whole process is it's not hunting and finding the term and servicing it in mass. Machines can [00:50:30] and will do that better than humans over time. But it's in understanding what the implications of that are, where the attorney really comes into play. I had a moment, a couple of months ago where I sat down with about 20 of our attorneys, and I said to them, how much time do you spend doing lawyering, doing law, doing exactly what you went to school for and what you're passionate about? How much of your day do you really spend sitting in that work? [00:51:00] And guess what they said?

Jacob Morgan: Probably not much. I'm guessing a very small percentage of their time.

Elena Donio: I think the low was 20% and the high was 40%.

Jacob Morgan: Wow, so not even half.

Elena Donio: Yeah. Which is really scary. The way I think they would categorize the rest of the time is in doing the mundane, doing what feels pretty administrative. Like

finding the term or the clause. Finding [00:51:30] the spot in the contract. Finding the document itself. Like where is that document, what file folder is it in, what desk drawer is it in? That you don't need to be a lawyer to do that, and that's what we'll progressively lean on the computers, the technology to do more and more of our time.

I see it as a real lift to the profession. I see it as an opportunity to restore the honor to the work. And we really look forward to that. The other thing is and you mentioned [00:52:00] this in your question that we aren't decreasing headcount. We aren't losing individuals in the industry because of technology, and I think that's really true for a number of the reasons that I mentioned. But in addition, the requirement for what's happening in legal is changing too.

Look at privacy right now. There's a bunch of new things that we need to be aware of. There's a bunch of new trends in social and accessibility [00:52:30] of data and transparency of data and all of those things that we need to continue to work on understand, understand the impacts of, and that's making for some really interesting legal work to be done and to be assessed, and so for everything that's making the life of the lawyer easier, there's also some new work coming our way, which I think is exciting and I think it's important at work that we do on behalf of the global economy.

Jacob Morgan:

I wanted to also ask you [00:53:00] about your perspectives on leadership because I know that was one of the things you're really interested in and I'm working on a new book on the future of leadership so I want to ask you just a couple quick questions on that before we wrap up. First, it's going to be three things. Looking around 7 to 10 years in the future if you're able to.

First is trends that you think will impact the future of leadership and then what skills and mindsets do you think will be crucial for leaders of the future, so how should [00:53:30] leaders think in the future and what skills, what should they actually know how to do in the future? And maybe we can start with the trends.

Elena Donio:

Sure. I think there are three or four key trends that we're watching and keeping a close eye on. I mentioned one of them and it's around technology and it's around assistive technology, it's around AI, machine learning, natural language processing. There are a bunch of things happening in technology. Accessibility of the data itself, the amount of data [00:54:00] we have access to and compute power are all things that I think have a tremendous impact on contract work, legal work in general, and our ability to do some really interesting things.

So technology is one, the second is just the distributed nature of work. I think is really a real thing, it's changing and growing the number of individuals. I mentioned this a little bit earlier. The number of individuals that are working remotely, that are [00:54:30] working all over the world. The global economy driving in distribution in work, I think calls on us to be better at communications, to grappling with keeping people connected, and the tools and

scaffolding are adapting to make that possible as well. And so the distributed nature of the work for us is another big thing.

The next thing I would talk about is the gig economy. When the gig economy [00:55:00] began to really take off in '08-'09 after the financial crisis, I think experts sort of largely believed that it was just a response to something happening at the time where the full time jobs weren't really available and so people would do what they had to do to make a living, and I think that's really changing.

The idea that the economy has recovered in such a big way yet the gig economy is stronger than ever is really indicative of the fact that this is just representative of how many many [00:55:30] people want to work. I saw a stat recently I think in Forbes or something like that talked about how by 2020 something like half of the workforce will be working in a gig kind of environment or a freelance environment.

So that's a really real thing and I think it speaks to the next generation entering the workforce and what their expectations are, they really want to optimize around experience, around touching multiple things in their lives, and multiple different types of solutions and technologies, multiple different groups of people, [00:56:00] and ethos and environments, and so the gig economy would be the last one that I would mention.

Jacob Morgan:

And so when you look at these trends, what do you think that means for how leaders that future should think, and what should they actually know how to do?

Elena Donio:

Yeah. I think there's a couple of big things there and I've talked, I've threaded a couple of these themes through the course of our conversation. I think one of them is being really thoughtful about the way communication is going to happen in the future. [00:56:30] Knowing that it's not enough to send the corporate-wide email. In fact I try really hard not to send a lot of corporate-wide emails, and when I do, they're very short.

Because attention spans on emails I think are really changing. We try to do a lot more with different medium and different media. So doing things that are video oriented, recordings, getting out into the offices, and getting people to gather in shared spaces and things like that [00:57:00] are really important and so I think the skillset around how to communicate broadly, being really creative about the way that we communicate, the mechanisms that we use. Knowing that the next generation is spending much more time on YouTube, and on Instagram than they are reading emails is just a really important reality that I think as leaders we need to adapt to, embrace, and utilize as we think about how that communication should work [00:57:30] across a distributed environment.

The second thing is I really think that it's incredibly important for leaders in any company whether you're a bank, whether you're a professional services firm. Whether you're a technology company to be up on what's happening in technology. To be experimenting. To be trying new apps, trying new devices. Really getting into what are clients might be experiencing, what the next generation of talent [00:58:00] might be experiencing.

And developing a real love of the research and being a student of that from whatever seat you're in, and so I would say if I had to put that into a skill bucket. I would call it technical aptitude. But also I really value people that are curious. That are studying all the time and want to know what's going on in technology and in the industry. [00:58:30] I would say lastly, it's sort of leadership style oriented, and it's knowing that the next generation of talent is not going to be comfortable in a command and control environment.

I think you brought that up in the very beginning of the call. Sort of knowing that it's really important to be inquisitive, to be listening, to be hearing, and profiling for ideas in all places [00:59:00] of the company, to be able to be vulnerable and know that the best answers very often don't come from the top offices, but rather come from a syndicate of individuals that are closest to the client, closest to the problems and opportunities that we're seeing in the field, and to really be active in creating and enforcing and rewarding that kind of dialog.

Jacob Morgan: Well, I have like another hundred questions I could ask you. I know we're already four minutes over the hour, [00:59:30] so I'll stop. Your answers have been fantastic. I love the stories and the examples and hopefully the listeners appreciate that as well, but before we wrap up, maybe you can let people know where can they connect with you or learn more about you and Axiom if they're interested.

Elena Donio: Absolutely, our website is Axiomlaw.com. I am on LinkedIn, and connect with me there, [01:00:00] and every once in a while I do a blog post and I'm also on Twitter at Elena Donio.

Jacob Morgan: Okay, very cool, and then last thing. I always at the end of the podcast. I ask maybe 3 to 5 really rapid fire, just fun questions so first one for you is what's the most embarrassing moment you've had at work?

Elena Donio: Walking down the street in New York going to a client visit where my laptop bag [01:00:30] had hiked my skirt way up to a place that it shouldn't have been and a lovely woman on the street tapped me before any of my colleagues noticed.

Jacob Morgan: All right. If you were a superhero, who would you be?

Elena Donio: I would be The Incredibles, the mom. What was she? She was elastic basically.

Jacob Morgan: Yes, she was. All right, what's a book that you recommend? Business book or non-business book.

Elena Donio: Yeah, I am reading John Doerr's [01:01:00] new book that I'm liking and it's called Measure What Matters.

Jacob Morgan: Okay, if you were doing a different career, what would you have ended up doing?

Elena Donio: I would be a rockstar for sure.

Jacob Morgan: I could see that. I could have the view. If you could have dinner with anybody in the world, alive or dead, who would it be?

Elena Donio: Barrack Obama.

Jacob Morgan: If you could live anywhere in the world, where would it be?

Elena Donio: Paris.

Jacob Morgan: Last two for you. If you could get rid of one workplace practice [01:01:30] tomorrow, what one workplace practice would you get rid of?

Elena Donio: Talking too loud on the phone.

Jacob Morgan: If you could implement one workplace practice, what would you implement tomorrow?

Elena Donio: Refill the coffee when it's empty.

Jacob Morgan: I like it. All right. Clearly a coffee, kind of fan of a coffee. We are in my house [01:02:00] as well so I don't blame you there. Well, those were all the questions I had for you so thank you very much for being a guest on the podcast and I appreciate your time.

Elena Donio: Wonderful chatting with you, Jacob. Thanks for the opportunity.

Jacob Morgan: Of course, and thanks everyone for tuning in. My guest again has been Elena Donio, the CEO of Axiom. I'll see all of you guys next week.