

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, thanks for joining me for another episode of The Future of Work [00:00:30] podcast. My guest today is Mala Singh, the Chief People Officer at Electronic Arts. Mala, thanks for joining me.

Mala Singh: Thanks Jacob, glad to be with you.

Jacob Morgan: We're actually recording this live from Electronic Arts in Redwood City, beautiful space. I walked in, I was greeted by a huge dragon and Cristiano Ronaldo on the big TV screen there, so that's always nice to see. Why don't you give people some background information about you, and how you got involved with this. What is a typical day like for you?

Mala Singh: Sure, so [00:01:00] a little bit of my background, I spent my formative years, grew up in New Jersey, and went to undergrad and grad school at Rutgers. Then my first HR, big HR job was for Cigna, the big insurance company in Hartford and Philadelphia, and that's where I cut my teeth on what I would call some of the core elements of this function, like performance, and employee relations, and so on. Then joined a Pharma company called Bristol-Myers Squibb for almost 10 years, and did several assignments, including [00:01:30] in Asia and Europe.

Then was in Europe, had my second child, and decided that it was time to really think about doing something different. Literally opened a world map, and said, "Where do I want to live and raise my family?" Picked a number cities in the world, and just opened my mind to opportunities that showed up in those cities. Electronic Arts called me a few weeks later, and it was to go to Asia and build the HR function there, and then eventually come into the Bay Area.

That was two of the six cities, and that's honestly [00:02:00] how I decided to join EA my first time around.

Jacob Morgan: Very cool.

Mala Singh: I'm a boomerang at EA, so I stayed at EA for almost 6 years, and then transitioned out in 2013 to explore what it was like to work in an early phase company. Joined Minted at a start up in San Francisco.

Jacob Morgan: Oh yeah, I know Minted.

Mala Singh: Yeah, they're amazing, they crowd source art and graphic design from independent artists all over the world, and produce beautiful products in the space of lifestyle, home décor, stationary, etc. Stepped into that ecosystem for three [00:02:30] years, and learned a ton about what it's like to compete for talent in a high-growth, early phase company, when you're competing with some of the giants of the valley.

Jacob Morgan: Yeah, I want to ask you about that later too.

Mala Singh: Yeah, for sure, happy to talk about that. Then in 2016 had the opportunity to rejoin EA, and work with an incredible group of leaders, many of whom I had already worked with. Stepped into really help us lead the talent strategy [00:03:00] and the culture and the focus of the human resources, people organization to a new place. That's why I'm here, and what's been fun about it. A typical day really varies, and I talk about two kinds of typical days. There are the days when I'm here in our headquarters, where it's really about connecting with key leaders, architecting the strategy, driving the strategy with leaders and with my own team.

It's a lot of planning, and it's a lot of driving that work. Of course I'm [00:03:30] home, which is amazing, because I'm a mom with three kids, and so my day usually starts with a little bit of time with them, and then off to work out, off to have my workday, and then they're my end cap for the evening, which is really, really nice.

Jacob Morgan: What time are you up in the morning usually?

Mala Singh: Usually about 5:30.

Jacob Morgan: Oh wow, really early.

Mala Singh: Yeah, I'm an early bird, my brain works best in the mornings, it just really does. I do some of my best thinking, and so I'm usually at my desk somewhere between 7 and 8 o'clock. It gives me a couple of hours of time before the workday starts [00:04:00] where I can really just coalesce my thinking and figure out what I want to accomplish that day, right? That's a typical day when I'm here, but one of the things that I've really been committed to, is what I call being out and about.

I spend a lot of time traveling to all of EA's different sites and geographies. In the year and a half I've been back, I've now visited 29 of our sites.

Jacob Morgan: Oh wow, all over the world?

Mala Singh: All over the world. It's those trips, those days are incredible, because it's time spent [00:04:30] deeply engaging with leaders of those sites, and doing skip level meetings, and fireside chats with different populations of our employees, which really gives me a pulse of what's happening in the company, what people's sentiment is. I honestly think one of the most important things you can do as a leader, is share your time and perspective. I learned so much from those visits and the time that I spend with our workers in every single geography, context, and setting, where we operate as a company.

It really helps inform our strategy for talent, and then assessment [00:05:00] of how we're doing in our business in execution. It allows me to bring back stories that helps reinforce the principles of what we practice as a company, and how we go forward and think about our relationship with our people. The day really varies depending on which part of the world I'm in.

Jacob Morgan: It also sounds like ... For a leader, you think it's important to be with people, not just Skype, or not just whatever?

Mala Singh: Yeah, I really do, and I think that particularly for this role, right? [00:05:30] When you're the Chief People Officer of an organization like this, it's just really important to stay connected with the reality on the ground, right? I talk about what I call the ground game, right? We can sit here in Redwood Shores, in this beautiful campus, and think we know what the companies really like, those 10,000 or so people that are all over the world, and some incredible different contexts and settings.

You don't really know, right? [00:06:00] Not until you go out there, and spend time and really create an environment where people want to share and be open with you. Some of those conversations are challenging, but I walk away always knowing exactly how people are feeling. I really, deeply believe, that especially as the leader of the people function in the company, you have your formal tools that you use to gather feedback, like your employee satisfaction surveys, and things like that.

I just believe especially, and we can talk about this with regard to the future of work, and what the next generation of workers expect. [00:06:30] They want a channel, and they want access, and they want to know that their perspectives and ideas are being heard at all levels and layers in the company. I think this is just one way as a people leader, I can do that.

Jacob Morgan: When you started doing these trips to different parts of the world, did you have a wake up moment? Where you were like, "Oh yeah, I know what it's like to work at EA," because you're here in this beautiful space in Redwood City. Did you have a point where you went to one of your sites? Just thought, "There is a huge disconnect between what it's like here, versus what I thought it [00:07:00] was really like."

Mala Singh: Yeah, and I think there were ... One of the most impressive sites we actually have, is in Bucharest, Romania.

Jacob Morgan: Never been there.

Mala Singh: Yeah, first of all, you should totally go, right? Bucharest is beautiful, it was my first time in Romania, and I've been to about 50 countries in the world, right? I've never been to Romania, and so I actually took the time and spent a weekend there. I went with our CFO, and we did a community outreach project. First of all, there's [00:07:30] just the crossing cultures and the perceptions you have about different cultures, and when you actually spend time in a place, how that perception changes.

The CFO and I did a community outreach project together. We went with a huge number of the remaining employees, and we did two different projects. He went to pick up litter in the woods, and I went to paint a building. I actually thought, "Okay, well this is just going to be slapping a little bit of paint and a photo op." Oh no, no, we painted I think 9000 ft.² of building. I was covered [00:08:00] in paint by the end of the day, and it was exhilarating, because to be side-by-side with our people doing something that gives back to their community, was incredible.

The positive surprise was I had no idea how much pride that team had in working for Electronic Arts.

Jacob Morgan: Very different than ...

Mala Singh: Very different, and sometimes when you sit in the larger sites, in the headquarters, there can be some cynicism that creeps into the system and the culture, right? When you step into [00:08:30] a place like this, that feels so far away from the core headquarters of the company, and you realize that people's experience is strong, their pride in the company and what we do is strong. Our brand and the marketplace is strong, it's incredible. It was just really fun spending time with that population of employees, or our customer advisors in Galway, Ireland, who think they have the most incredible job in the world, because they get to talk to people who play our games and solve problems [00:09:00] for them.

When you're at headquarters and you're trying to fight against the competition and build this business in an aggressive marketplace, and then you step out and you feel a passion and enthusiasm for people in the company, it's exhilarating.

Jacob Morgan: Oh yeah, I'm sure. In fact, I think a lot of people listening to this would be like, "Wait a minute, she took a trip with her CFO?" Sometimes there's so much tension between HR and the finance function. It sounds like you guys have a good relationship.

Mala Singh: Oh, we have a phenomenal relationship, and he's an incredible ... Blake Jorgensen [00:09:30] is an incredible CFO, but more importantly he's an incredible human being. I would say what we have in this leadership team, is people who genuinely like and respect each other. I love spending time with Blake, we don't get enough time together. Like all of us, we're busy, and so when we have moments and opportunities like that to just hang out and do something that's outside of the norm, it's just so great.

Jacob Morgan: Yeah.

Mala Singh: We did that together on a Friday, and then I spent the weekend exploring. I went to Transylvania, which is not at all like what we think Transylvania [00:10:00] is supposed to be. It's beautiful visit, I think it was the oldest Gothic church in Europe is based there, and it's a beautiful town called Brasov. Rolling green countryside's, just idyllic, truly gorgeous.

Jacob Morgan: All right, it's going on my list of places to visit.

Mala Singh: Please do, please do.

Jacob Morgan: What about some background information about EA, Electronic Arts? Obviously you guys have lots of famous games, you have what? 8,000, 10,000 people around the world, so maybe you can give people some context around [00:10:30] who is EA? What do you guys do?

Mala Singh: Yeah, so what we do is interactive entertainment, right? Interactive entertainment, people know it as video games. The world's emerging, right? There's an important part of the zeitgeist today, where people really don't want content that's just served to them, they want content that they can actually interact with, right? We're in a position in an industry that's actually going to go through some pretty significant change. The advancements in technology is changing the way people play games.

Things like [00:11:00] mobile phones, and the computing power that exists on mobile phones, has now created access to interactive entertainment and video games for millions and billions of people, who never would've been able to purchase a console and get over that hurdle price of a console. Now we think there's about 2 1/2 billion people in the world who identify themselves as gamers.

Jacob Morgan: Wow.

Mala Singh: Yeah, 2 1/2 billion people across all geographies, across all generations, across all genders. People really love immersing [00:11:30] themselves in this incredible content, and having these rich experiences. People play for lots of different reasons, some people love the achievement that you can get from a game. That sense of achievement, some people love the competitive nature of

it. Some people love just hanging out with their friends and having an experience together.

People play for all sorts of different reasons, and I feel really honored that we get to be part of an organization that creates fun and lightness in people's [00:12:00] lives, particularly when the world is heavy, right?

Jacob Morgan: I stopped playing games, because I was too addicted to them. When I was younger, I used to play lots of those games, and it was not good. My high school grades were going down, everything was going down. Now I have a lot of my neighbors that have video game consoles, they're playing games all the time. My wife is just like, "Yeah, you're not getting one of those, because I'm never going to see you again," which is true.

Mala Singh: Everything in moderation, right?

Jacob Morgan: Yes I love games, and now the most that I do is play chess. She's allowed me to do chess, but [00:12:30] aside from that, I can't get too crazy with it. What are some of your biggest games that people might know of?

Mala Singh: Sure, well a lot of people know our sports franchises, right? FIFA is one of the most admired games in the world. We're right now in the middle of the World Cup, and so a lot of folks are playing FIFA. It's incredible, because FIFA really ... Soccer, football, as it's called in most of the world, really cuts across generations, and geographies, and cultures. It's just a really beloved sport, and so [00:13:00] we get to make a game that allows people to re-create some of the experiences they see with their favorite teams, or play like their favorite teams.

That's incredibly popular, we have also Madden Football in the United States primarily, which is hugely popular. Then our games cut across a lot of different genres, so things like the Battlefield series, which is a shooter, but is incredible. A little funny story about Battlefield, a couple of years ago we launched Battlefield 1, which was a World War I setting for shooters. Yeah, and [00:13:30] my oldest son developed a really passionate interest in World War history as a result of playing that game.

So much so, that some time that we spent in Europe last year, was visiting some of the key World War I sites. It all sparked from this interest in the game. There's franchises like Battlefield, there's franchises like the Sims.

Jacob Morgan: Of course the Sims, everybody knows the Sims.

Mala Singh: Yeah, everybody knows the Sims, and Sims City, and then we have a lot of really fun mobile games, like Star Wars Galaxy of Heroes, or The Simpsons: Tapped Out, Plants Versus [00:14:00] Zombies.

Jacob Morgan: I had so many hours with Plants Versus Zombies.

Mala Singh: Yeah, it's so much fun, and so we have I think one of the broadest, most diverse portfolio of gaming experiences of any company in our industry. Really are able to offer these kinds of interactive experiences to lots of different kinds of people in different genres. One of my favorite games is this group called Pogo, which is just a lot of ... I think the demographic actually skews to a lot of older women, [00:14:30] who love just getting together and playing these games on their PCs.

There's just a wide variety and genre of games that we produce.

Jacob Morgan: You have what? Over 8000 employees around the world.

Mala Singh: Yeah, approaching 10,000 actually.

Jacob Morgan: Wow.

Mala Singh: Yeah.

Jacob Morgan: You guys are a huge company.

Mala Singh: Yeah, we're pretty sizable.

Jacob Morgan: I have a couple of things I wanted to ask you about. I suppose the first one would be, what is it like in the Bay Area? I mean you guys are headquartered here.

Mala Singh: We are.

Jacob Morgan: You're near the Facebook's, the Googles, the LinkedIn's. I [00:15:00] saw Oracle just across the Bay here, and I know a lot of people always turn to the Bay Area as the model of what they should be doing in their organizations, as far as talent. Being in the Bay Area, what's been your perspective around competing with the Googles, the Facebook's, the LinkedIn's?

Mala Singh: Yeah, here's my perspective on it. A lot of times people think about competing with these behemoths of organizations with huge market caps. The question always starts with, well, [00:15:30] how do we compete with them for talent from a comp perspective, right?

Jacob Morgan: Yeah, exactly.

Mala Singh: The fact of the matter is, I think that it's a race to the bottom, because what happens, is you try to meet what you think is the market rate driven by these companies, and then other companies step in and they raise that rate, right? That's what I mean by, it's a race to the bottom, it's futile. I actually deeply believe that the way we compete with these organizations, is the experience of

being an employee here. We know, and all the studies show this, when it really comes down to it, you need a certain level of compensation [00:16:00] to be able to live your life, right?

It's a hygiene factor, Maslow's hierarchy of needs is one of the core things. Once you get to that place, then there are some other really important things that come into play. When I think about and talk to our people, you know what the themes are of what they say really matters to them? Is a few things, and this is not in priority order, but it's things like one, I am working for a company whose mission I believe in, with a value system that's aligned to my own, right?

Second thing is they're working for a manager or someone who [00:16:30] deeply is invested in their success, that cares about them, wants to see them learn and grow, and is able to provide that feedback, support, coaching, that enables them to do that. Next thing they talk about, is being surrounded by people they admire, including people they'd want to hang out with, right? Like I'm sitting next to and working with a team that I just really like. People that I can learn from, people that I have fun with.

The next thing they talk about, is then opportunities to learn and grow, [00:17:00] and particularly the next generation of workers, I hear a lot that the number one thing they want, is different experiences. The opportunity to really try different things, and scale in different ways, whether it's different projects, teams, geographies, that's really, really important to them. When I step back and I think about how we compete with these organizations, it's on those things.

The quality of the leadership, the quality of the work, is it interesting and challenging? Are they learning and growing and surrounded by people that are aligned with them from [00:17:30] a values perspective, and just human beings?

Jacob Morgan: Yeah.

Mala Singh: Yeah.

Jacob Morgan: I know a lot of people say things like, "Oh, Google's got all these crazy perks and free food, and you get a slide, and who knows what ..."

Mala Singh: Yeah, I call it perkeage.

Jacob Morgan: Yeah, exactly.

Mala Singh: I refuse to compete on perkeage. I think what governs how I think about that, is I ask this question, how do we care for our people while they're here, okay? Caring for our people means something. I don't think someone's going to come or [00:18:00] go in your company based on having three meals a day, I just don't

believe that. I think it really is going to be about the quality of experience that they have, and the work that they're doing, and how interesting that is.

Yes, those things are nice, but they're not the differentiator of what truly attracts people to your org., and what enables them to do their best work. That's what I really think about and said back. Yes, this is a beautiful campus, but it's more about expressing who we are, and creating spaces. Like you walk around here and there are consuls, gaming consoles [00:18:30] everywhere, and devices everywhere, where we ask people to take time and play the games, play our games, play competitors games, really understand what's out there.

Play with your friends here at work, we have several of our teams do little tournaments.

Jacob Morgan: I'm sure.

Mala Singh: It's just a lot of fun, they get early betas of lot of the games we're developing. They're formal mechanisms where they get to play and provide feedback.

Jacob Morgan: Oh, that's fun.

Mala Singh: Yeah, so our work is play, it really is, and I think it's those things that enable us to compete with these [00:19:00] other organizations.

Jacob Morgan: It's not like you guys don't have perks. I don't want to make it sound like people listening to this are thinking that, "Oh, they have nothing there, and they're competing with Google." You guys do have still a beautiful space, you have like a lot of really cool stuff going on inside of EA. It sounds like you're not worried if all of a sudden Google says, I don't know, "Free massages, free [crosstalk 00:19:20], free who knows what else."

Mala Singh: Yeah, we take a little bit of a different attack to it. We think about things like we want our people to be healthy, right? Yes, we [00:19:30] have fitness center subsidies, and we have, in the campuses that we actually own, we have on-site gyms, right? We talk about movement, and stress reduction, and all of those kinds of things. We strive for the food in our cafés, whether it's free or not to be healthy food, right? Reduce the amount of junk food people are eating.

More importantly, we look at the things that we offer. We just implemented a series of what we call compassionate leaves, meaning giving generous time for [00:20:00] people that are going through momentous or difficult time in their lives. You've got somebody you need to care for, because they're ill, and replacing people's income when they're taking time to do things like that. There are these things that are just really important, that humanizes the experience.

Jacob Morgan: Moments that matter.

Mala Singh: Yeah, the moments that matter in people's lives, right? When I think about the perks and what we offer, it's in the spirit of that, as supposed to what's the next hip thing we can put in, so that we can compete with Google.

Jacob Morgan: Yeah, yeah, that's fair enough. I'm curious, [00:20:30] how do you think all this happened? It seems like if you were to look back ... I don't know if you remember your first job for example.

Mala Singh: I do.

Jacob Morgan: It was probably ... There was I'm guessing no gym, probably maybe no food that was offered, none of this coaching and mentoring stuff. Now it seems like a lot of companies around the world are thinking about this other stuff, like mental well-being, physical well-being, gyms, what can we do to take care of people? It seems like this is a new ... I don't know, a consciousness for organizations [00:21:00] around the world almost.

Mala Singh: That's right, I think there's a couple of things that factored into this. One is we used to think about work and life balance, right? That implies that work and life are two separate entities, and they don't meet. Balance is about the proportion of time spent in each. That's absolutely a false concept, it's really work and life integrated, right? People don't leave who they are and what's happening in their lives outside the door when they walk into one of our facilities around [00:21:30] the world, right?

Actually you don't want people to do that, you want people to bring their whole selves into work, and their best, so that they can really, truly do their best work, achieve their full potential. This idea of helping people manage their whole selves while they're here, and your role as an organization doing that, really resonates for me. We do think about that, the other dimension that I think is important, is that talented people ...

You look at what's happening in the world today, right? [00:22:00] With the rise of automation and technology augmenting human beings, the skills in our environments are really polarizing now. Meaning many jobs are moving to become very highly skilled jobs, or on the flip side, what I would call more artisan jobs. I suspect we'll always need people like plumbers and carpenters and those roles, right?

Jacob Morgan: Which are hugely in demand by the way.

Mala Singh: Extremely in demand, they're high skilled, but they're artisanal [00:22:30] in nature, right? When you look at organizations, what you see is that technology's augmenting a lot of the middle skilled roles, and pushing the skills that we need to be highly specialized. The people that have those skills, and are really great team members, are incredibly in high demand. We're all competing for this

talent, and back to what we were talking about, what really motivates people, and why they choose to stay in organizations?

I think companies are realizing [00:23:00] that in order to compete for this incredible talent, because we all want them, we all want the same people. 10 years ago EA primarily competed with other game companies. Today we compete with every next-generation technology and entertainment company for our talent. You have to bring it, and you have to bring a different experience, based on those things that we were talking about, right?

What's the environment I'm stepping into? Am I going to be able to do my best work in that environment and realize my potential? Everything that contributes to that is why [00:23:30] I believe we're moving in this direction that you're observing.

Jacob Morgan: Have you ever had a situation where I don't know, maybe somebody was interviewing for EA, and you were considering offering them a job, and they said, "Well, LinkedIn's got this." How do you address that as somebody that is trying to convey the vision, the purpose behind EA? Meanwhile, somebody that's trying to apply there, is just so focused on the perks and what they get.

Mala Singh: Yeah.

Jacob Morgan: Do you just say, "All right, get out, I don't want to talk to you anymore."

Mala Singh: No, I [00:24:00] often question whether those are the right people for us, right? I think here's what we typically do, so when people come to explore the opportunity at EA, they talk to a lot of people here. We give them the opportunity to meet lots of people. Sometimes people say to us, because Google's had this methodology around very few people in the interview every process, right? We actually go the opposite direction, we get them to meet tons and tons of people. What I always say to people, is where there's consistency, there's truth.

In these 14 people you met as you were exploring this opportunity [00:24:30] with EA ...

Jacob Morgan: Just like a 14 person interview, or casual?

Mala Singh: 14 different people you meet through the process of exploring a job here. Multiple interviews, sometimes you'll have lunch with some people, sometimes you'll do a little panel conversation, and meet some of the coworkers that you're going to be interacting with every single day. What I often say to people when they say things like that is, "Where there's consistency, there's truth. What did you hear were the consistent themes from all of these people that you met?"

We don't script people, we just have them talk about their experience here, and what work they do. [00:25:00] What I say to people, is the consistency of the things that you hear. The incredible work that we're doing, the interesting challenges we have, the dynamism of this industry. The caliber of people that are here, the passion that's here, the commitments we've made to some things that are really important around our values, diversity, inclusion.

Those are the things that you're going to experience in this culture, and the truth is real, it's real because you've heard this from everybody, right? What I often say to people is, "You've got to soul search on what's most important to you. If [00:25:30] those are the kinds of things, those perks, and having a bicycle, and all this stuff, is really most important to you, then you should go there. If you come here, this is what you're going to get, and really choose wisely about ... Reflect on who you are, what you want, and this is what we offer. If that matches, great, if it doesn't, that's okay too."

Jacob Morgan: It almost seems like more of, I don't want to say casual policy, but more open instead of closed. In a lot of companies when they try to hire, it's very scripted, right? You come into this room, you'll talk to this person for an hour, then you talk to [00:26:00] this person for an hour. It's very controlled, it's like going into a staged house, but it sounds like part of the process when people come to EA, is not having like the staged house, where you see everything is out there for you. You actually get a chance to meet some people and see what's beyond just the staging so to speak.

Mala Singh: That's right.

Jacob Morgan: Which I think is great, and so many companies are scared of it, because they're probably worried that people will tell them the truth about what it's like to work there, and that they don't like it, and they want to leave. [00:26:30] You've really built that culture where people are happy working here. You mentioned a couple of things, which I was interesting. One is this idea of bringing your whole self to work, and I've heard some people say, "We don't want their whole self, we just want their best self."

Some people say, "No, no, no, it's the whole self." Where do you stand on that? What's the difference? Do you want their whole self, the good and the bad, or just their best self?

Mala Singh: Yeah, I think that this is a very complex topic.

Jacob Morgan: Yeah.

Mala Singh: Right? [00:27:00] I do think it's their whole self, because I think that, who are we to judge elements of somebody's personality, and decide whether that's best or not? I think it's whole self combined with some principles and values about what this workplace looks and feels like. We have a very core principle around

this being a respectful workplace, right? If your whole self includes a piece that would manifest itself in a disrespectful way here, we don't want that, right?

[00:27:30] At the same time, if you're a different thinker, or you're a little quirkier, or you're into some stuff that maybe is like a little bit outside of what a lot of people would consider norm, that's okay, as long as it doesn't offend people in a way that's not appropriate, or violates what we believe is important part of being a respectful environment here, we're good with that. I do think, and look the research proves this time and time again, that the more divergent perspectives and different thinking you have in a room, [00:28:00] the better the outcome.

Jacob Morgan: Oh yeah. Lot's of research on that.

Mala Singh: The better the solutions, right? I don't want put guardrails on who people are and what their identity is and what they bring into the workplace, right? As long as it still falls within this bar we have for respectful interactions, and having a supportive environment.

Jacob Morgan: Makes sense, so I also want to ask you about millennial's and changing demographics. I thought that we were done with this conversation like a year or two ago, and still it is always brought up [00:28:30] every time, whether it's with conferences that I'm going to. Like everyone wants to know about millennial's, and the multiple generations, and there's a big debate between it's not about generations, it's about life stages.

Mala Singh: Yeah.

Jacob Morgan: I mean what's your whole perspective on this changing demographic millennial, Gen., Z., debate that's out there?

Mala Singh: Well, it's interesting, because it's not just about the millennial's and the Gen., Z., it's also the other side, it's the boomers and the traditionalists, right? Today's workforce, we know that because human beings are getting healthier, [00:29:00] because of advancements in medical technology, we have a lot more insights on what keeps somebody healthy through their lives. People are staying in the workforce longer, sometimes socioeconomic conditions dictate that people have to stay in the workforce longer.

I see it as less about the millennial's and the Gen., Z's, but more about understanding that there are going to be multiple generations in any given work environment at any point in time. Our people practices have to shift from a one-size-fits-all, to a one-size-fits-one, right? Every person is gonna come [00:29:30] into this organization with special, unique situations, circumstances, and needs. The way we have to think about our people practices, is how they're flexible to cater to some of the most important distinctions and attributes that people bring.

Whether it's their generational mindset, or other things, right? As we think about the company, and EA from a generational perspective, had been a heavily Gen X company. Last year we tipped over to majority millennial, [00:30:00] right? I do believe some of the changes in the philosophies and how we think about our relationship with the people who work here, is as a result of that shifting demographic, and how that population wants to be in a workplace, and how they want to interact.

I think that's actually a really, really great thing. I love it, I love that population and the generation that's coming right after them are amazing. The thing I love most about that population, is they really believe they can do anything. I truly think they can, and so what I think about, is how we harness all [00:30:30] of the generations and all of the diverse attributes we have in the company, so again, so people can do their best work.

Jacob Morgan: There was also another debate around this notion of treat your employees like a family, or do you approach it with this tour of duty? I'm assuming you've heard of that concept, some people haven't. The notion that instead of assuming people are going to be like a family, just assume that they're going to be there for a couple of years, then they're going to move on to the next thing, or rotate also.

Mala Singh: Yeah, so actually I hate polarizing [00:31:00] things, and pushing into one extreme versus another. We've done some work in the last year to really think through what our value proposition is to people who choose to work here, and what the journey is. We talk about four phases of the employee journey for us. Join, that part where you're a candidate and exploring, contribute, which is the part where you're onboarding, learning the organization, and learning your job and your role and beginning to actually contribute.

Grow is the next phase, which is adding to your skills, having different experiences, [00:31:30] continuing to contribute in a higher way. Then the last phase which we articulated, is what we call depart, right? We really think about the fact that people are going to spend shorter periods of time in organizations. You want to treat that depart phase as carefully as you treat the others. We deeply believe, and EA has one of the highest return rates of any organization, I'm a product of that.

Jacob Morgan: Yeah, I was going to say, you came back.

Mala Singh: Yeah, sure I walked away from EA in 2013 never thinking I'd [00:32:00] return to EA. It just made sense, the opportunity was compelling. The team is compelling, and so I deeply believe that people will spend time with you at a moment in time, and maybe you'll continue to provide enriching experiences that are compelling for them to stay, or maybe you won't. Maybe they'll go learn something different. I deeply believe that the time I spent away from EA better prepared me to do this job, then had I stayed at EA those three years.

Jacob Morgan: It's okay, because so many organizations, especially in HR, [00:32:30] I'm sure you've heard this, one of the things that they always look at, is how do we keep people here longer?

Mala Singh: Yeah.

Jacob Morgan: It seems like that's starting to become a little bit of an outdated metric as far as how you might measure the success of HR, is how long people stay there.

Mala Singh: Yeah, I'm not sure 10 years is the right thing to look at anymore.

Jacob Morgan: Yeah.

Mala Singh: I think it really is contribution. For whatever time period you're here, it's contribution, and if you move on and you're somebody that we deeply, deeply valued, then the challenge I have for our leaders, is how do you maintain that relationship, [00:33:00] so that when the moment is right, people come back, and contribute in a different way?

Jacob Morgan: Yeah, it makes sense. One of the things that you mentioned, is that you guys are thinking differently about the HR function as a whole.

Mala Singh: Sure.

Jacob Morgan: Maybe we can look at it from two ways. What is HR usually, like how do most people think of HR? What are you guys doing to change it? What's this new HR function you guys are creating?

Mala Singh: Yeah, so with these massive trends that are shaping the way of work for the future, [00:33:30] so whether it's globalization, people are being able to contribute in a distributed way from all parts of the globe. Rapid advancements in technology that are changing the skill sets that are in companies today. The multiple generations that we talked about, or tech that enables people to communicate seamlessly and disseminate information. All these things are shifting work in a different way.

There are traditional HR functions who define their roles as acquiring talent for the company, running processes, [00:34:00] like pay processes, and employee relations processes, and all of those things, and really supporting the business strategy through some core processes that are part of this discipline. That is a method and an approach that serves companies for what they used to be, and how they used to operate, and how they used to think about their relationship with people.

Given everything that we've talked about, I talk about putting the humanity back into human resources. Particularly here in the Valley, you look at some of the [00:34:30] things that have emerged, and some of the toxic cultures that

have been in the media lately. People ask the question, "Where was the HR function in this?" Right?

Jacob Morgan:

Which is interesting, because so many people look to the Bay Area as these amazing companies, but it seems like the Bay Area's having more problems than anyone else.

Mala Singh:

Along that dimension, it's not been a great couple of years for sure. As we think about the human resources function, I actually am going down the path of not even calling it human resources anymore, and really talking about the people experience, [00:35:00] right? I think this function contributes, and must contribute in a very different way, which is there's a partnership with the business leaders to really help them think through how to architect the future of the company through its people, and through its talent.

That's a very specific function, things like understanding the business, crafting a talent strategy, building a workforce plan that ensures that you have the right skills at the right time in the right teams in the right geographies. That's really powerful and important work, and then the effectiveness [00:35:30] of those organizations and teams and the leaders who are leading those. That's a big component of the work, right? It's all business driving, business facing.

There's another component of this function, which is really about the advocacy for a strong employee and people experience, right? That is the piece that maybe we've missed a little bit in Silicon Valley, right? Where workers feel like they have a team that's truly advocating to ensure that they have a good experience while they're here. That they are in an environment [00:36:00] that's safe, an environment where they're going to be respected, and feel like they can actually do their best work.

We're building that team within our organization, whose real focus is on delivering a great people experience every single day through frontline work with people managers, and front-line work with our employees. The other dimension of the function, it's warming up the relationship, right? Stepping away from seeing ourselves as compliance and policy, to more enabling. How do we help [00:36:30] give people the information they need, empower the work experience with better technology and tools? Not do it in a way that is prescriptive, or parental, or compliance oriented, where the underlying assumption is we expect you to do something wrong.

We're going to have all these policies that prevent you from doing things wrong, versus we trust you. Here's some guidelines, and here's just some things you need to understand about what it means to be in a respectful workplace, and what we expect of you, right? There's some just deep philosophical [00:37:00] differences I think about how these functions need to operate, in order to really contribute to businesses in the future.

Jacob Morgan: What are you guys doing to make that shift? Is it how you structure your teams?

Mala Singh: Yeah, it's all of the above.

Jacob Morgan: Okay, so yeah, what are you guys doing?

Mala Singh: Yeah, so there's a few things that we're doing. One is we're looking at the caliber and standards for the people we have in the function, right? Their ability to understand and be aligned with these philosophies, their ability to build business acumen, to understand things like analytics. Also, see themselves [00:37:30] as an advocate for people and talent within the company. The second thing, is we've looked at our structure and really are going down this path.

This is not innovative or new, but how we're thinking about it might be slightly different. Of thinking about business partners in the function, whose job truly is to support and focus on the business and how to power the business through a talent strategy. Then there's another team that's being built who we're calling the people practices team. Their role is really advocacy for frontline managers, and advocacy for [00:38:00] employees. Really looking at all of our programs and practices, and making sure that they are fully in support of delivering a great employee experience that unlocks people's potential, and allows them to do great work.

Absolutely looking at the structure, and then the other piece, is we're looking at the product that comes out of this function. Whether it's the content, meaning the policies, the learning and development that we produce, and looking at all of that through the lens of where does the company need to go? How do we make it digestible, easy? This whole idea of user experience, [00:38:30] which is something that a lot of technology companies think about, bringing this concept of user experience into the HR function as well, right?

That is not how we've typically grown up as a function, right? We've not thought about the end user, or the naïve user in how we put our policies, tools, practices out there. That's a shift that we've made in our function in particular.

Jacob Morgan: What is it like to work at Electronic Arts?

Mala Singh: I laugh out loud every single day. What I mean by that, [00:39:00] is I feel like I work with some of the wittiest, funniest, most passionate ... I go from laughing out loud, to being deeply inspired, to feeling real responsibility, to not only our people, but the players, these hundreds of millions of players who play Electronic Arts games. I think about the depth of the stories we tell, the characters, the identities we represent in our games. How we [00:39:30] are able to shift mindsets, and shift maybe society someday, as a result of the experiences we put out there, and how people interact with our content.

It is a place of inspiration for sure, and we're working towards having workplaces and environments that are incredibly inspiring. We work hard, we do a lot of good work, we have deep challenges. We want to disrupt this industry, we believe we're in a unique position to lead that disruption. [00:40:00] It vacillates from being super challenging, to super fun, and super engaging and deeply inspiring at the same time.

Jacob Morgan: Let's say I was an employee of EA, today is my first day, maybe you can walk through some of the things that you offer for your employees.

Mala Singh: Sure.

Jacob Morgan: I guess we can look at some of the perks, some of the benefits, some of the training opportunities, some of the learning opportunities. The spaces in which they work, and what those are like. Like an auditory tour through [00:40:30] EA.

Mala Singh: Absolutely, and when I think about that, I really think about your experience is slightly different depending on where in the world you are, right? We are a global company, and we're trying not to have the Redwood Shores, California mindset dominate everything. We really want to find this beautiful middle ground between EA's culture and values and who we are, but also respecting the local geographies in which we operate. Your experience is [00:41:00] slightly different, but one of the things we know is, day one, you walk in, you go through what we call our day one onboarding program it's called game on.

Right? Of course, it's going to be a lot of gaming puns throughout this whole [crosstalk 00:41:10]. I haven't used level up yet, but that's coming soon. You go through game on, and game on, the purpose of that orientation program is not about here's all the policies, it's not that stuff. It really is connect to who we are, connect to the values. We ask people to think about what player are you, right? If you've [00:41:30] played games, or even board games, how do you play? Are you an achiever? Are you a competitor? Why do you play?

We deeply try to connect people in that experience to each other as a newbie cohort joining the company, but also go really deep on who we are as a company, our identity and games, and what we do, and the power that those have in the world. That's what day one is about, and then we have an entire program, which is a year one onboarding program, where people connect with each other. We use a lot of virtual tools, [00:42:00] like Slack to form cohorts.

We have lots of really great content that people can download and learn about different things. One of the best, most fun things that we do right now, is we have a team that does something called Game and Watch. Every month or so, they publish a little five minute video about the coolest, hottest new thing that's happening in our industry. They literally will play through and talk about different games and genres and things that are emerging.

It's just a fun way for people to understand [00:42:30] who we are, what we do, etc. Then, depending on the space and environment that you join, we have some beautiful, incredible workplaces around the company, and around the world. It is this blend of local flair, but also EA. There are signature elements to an EA workplace, no matter where you are in the world. You're going to walk in, you're going to see gaming consoles, you're going to see imagery of our characters.

Our workplaces are designed for deep collaboration, so it's a combination of space that allows [00:43:00] you to do your work, but also we encourage people to step into open spaces where they're engaging with each other. We design our cafés and such that force people to actually come together, right? We hired an incredible workplace and environment designer in the last year, whose sole role is to think through our values and culture, and how they manifest themselves in our physical workplaces.

Everywhere around the world, we believe people should have a core set of benefits that cater to their lives and the support of their families. [00:43:30] Whether it's our leave programs, or our insurance programs, and those kinds of things. Everybody gets a certain number of games each year. When you join the company, you get a little subsidy towards buying the console of your choice. We have wonderful stores and lots of swag that people love wearing. There are fitness benefits, there are meals and snacks that we provide in lots of places around the world.

There's opportunities for learning, a lot of which is delivered just in time online, [00:44:00] so that people can absorb chunks that they need. Then if what I like to say is, if you have the honor and privilege of leading others, meaning you're a manager, there's a whole other series of learning and onboarding that you have to go through to be able to do that well. There are a lot of things that we offer that I think are really, really great.

Jacob Morgan:

Yeah, and I'll ask you about the leader and the management stuff in a minute. Specifically, the learning piece is one that I find particularly interesting, because it seems like this notion of [00:44:30] perpetual learning, and learning all the time is a huge area of emphasis for companies around the world. Maybe you can walk us through how does learning work here? I've been at EA, I've been here for a year, is it my responsibility to find you things to learn? Is it conversations that my manager has with me?

Then how do I actually learn new things? Do I book a conference room, and watch a video?

Mala Singh:

Yeah, so there's a couple of different ways, so our general philosophy around this, is the 70/20/10 rule, right? 70% of your learning happens [00:45:00] through experiences, right? Whether it's the project you're on, or the piece of work that you take on, 70% of your learning ... This is how adults learn best, is through experiences, right? We believe deeply in putting people through

different experiences that help them grow. 20% is really direct coaching that you get from your manager, whether it's about your work, or how you should grow.

Feedback that helps you get better at what you do, and then 10% should be formal learning. Whether that happens in a classroom, or whether it happens online. [00:45:30] What we're learning is that people's capacity and interest in spending days in a classroom, isn't that great. In our organization at least, what resonates for them, is just in time, small snippets, where they can go learn something and then immediately apply it. This year one of the big investments we're making, is a better learning management tool, with better curated content, that allows people to pull down the content that they want to absorb when they're absolutely going to need it and use [00:46:00] it.

Powering that through technology, so that everybody around the world can actually do that. Even things like translation, right? Being able to allow people all over the globe to access the right content in their own language, is super important. We're making investments behind that, so that people can really get the learning they need when they need it.

Jacob Morgan: I don't know, would it be similar to watching a YouTube video, or finding something on YouTube or Netflix?

Mala Singh: Yeah, or like webinars on specific topics, or even outside of our company there's a lot of great content that's out there. Whether it's TED talks and [00:46:30] those forums ...

Jacob Morgan: A lot of it's free.

Mala Singh: Yeah, a lot of it's free, but there's a lot and it's free, and the most important thing is curation, right? Looking at that content, so what we're trying to do is be able to curate it. We say, "Hey, if you want to understand motivation, here's the best piece on motivation that aligns with our philosophy on motivation." Really encouraging people to self-guide around this stuff. The other piece that I want to really call out though, that I think we're doing a much better job of, is community [00:47:00] building. We have different communities in the company, whether it's game designers, or artists, or software engineers, producers, lots of different function.

What we're trying to do now, is really put emphasis behind connecting these communities using technology, so that people can learn from each other, share practices, get together when they're traveling to different geographies, and dig into things that they really are interested in. We do have big forums every year, like we have technology forums where we bring together our key technologists. [00:47:30] Forums where we bring together our game developers, so that they can really riff on the things that are happening in their specific discipline and dimension, and get some new learning around that.

Jacob Morgan: I want to talk just briefly about the learning and the management aspect. Obviously a lot of this stuff at EA only works if you have the right managers and leaders in place, who care about this, who believe in coaching and mentoring others.

Mala Singh: Yeah.

Jacob Morgan: Two questions, one is how do you make sure that you have those people?

Mala Singh: Yeah.

Jacob Morgan: [00:48:00] Then what do you do with managers that have maybe been here for a while, that are not so good at embracing that new way of leading?

Mala Singh: Yeah.

Jacob Morgan: Those are probably not easy conversations to have.

Mala Singh: No, they're not easy conversations to have. We actually have a large number of people managers in the company. Many people who stepped into management, because they believed that, that was a way to advance their career. They didn't necessarily see that there was enough of a robust individual path, and so we have to change [00:48:30] that. We're doing a lot of work, so that if you're a phenomenal software engineer, you can have a robust career as a software engineer, and an individual track that allows you to progress and be rewarded for that ...

Jacob Morgan: As an individual.

Mala Singh: As an individual in a really compelling way, versus feeling like you have to step into managing others in order to feel progression. We've tuned a lot of our work towards developing what I call these individual tracks, and that's really, really important. That when you have people who opt into management, [00:49:00] they have to really want to do it. They have to be really passionate about it.

Jacob Morgan: It's interesting.

Mala Singh: I think there's a lot of people that step into people management without real passion.

Jacob Morgan: Oh yeah, it's more money, more ...

Mala Singh: You know as well as I do, managing others is not easy, it's hard.

Jacob Morgan: Yeah.

Mala Singh:

To do that without having passion and real desire for it, is not a recipe for success, right? That's step one, is really test people's appetite and passion for managing others. The second thing, is we are now resetting the expectations of people management in the [00:49:30] company, and making it a real discipline, right? A discipline that you are rewarded for, you're evaluated against. We're implementing something called a manager survey for the first time this year, where managers ... There's always been 360 feedback, but we're really focusing in on the dimensions of what makes for really great people management, and giving our managers very crisp, clear feedback on how they're doing around those dimensions, and then backing it up with development.

The same thing with the development, it's going to be chunkable, small increments, so that people [00:50:00] can consume what they want and need in the moment, in advance of doing it. A lot of it, there's this is dimension of ... We focus a lot on how to make great leaders, and there's a lot of good content out there about what great looks like for leadership. Sometimes I think we have to go back to the basics on people management, like how do you have a good one on one discussion, right?

How do you give somebody feedback, both positive, and when it's constructive, how do you have that hard conversation, right? What [00:50:30] are the words you use? Sometimes I find that our people managers just need really basic support on those things. How do you communicate? How do you run a really good staff meeting? What should your staff meeting consist of, right? Some of those basic things that go back and have them reflect on and think about the effectiveness of their own process as a manager.

We're doing a lot of investment in that stuff.

Jacob Morgan:

I really love the point that you mentioned about giving individuals that path. I think companies really, really struggle with [00:51:00] that, because they always assume like you said, you've been there for a while, you want more, we've got to help you manage people. Do you have any example of what that individual path might look like for anybody? Just so the people listening to this, maybe they can think of how they might be able to apply that.

Mala Singh:

Yeah, absolutely, so one of the core principles of how I've managed my own career, and something I deeply, deeply believe, is that diversity of experiences is the linchpin to everything. Meaning the more diverse experiences you have, the more [00:51:30] learning agile you are, the more innovative your thinking, the better your problem-solving, because you've learned how to diagnose a situation, and how to adapt to it. The thing that I have been on my little travels throughout the company talking about, is I like to say when presented with the obvious in an opportunity, choose the different, right?

The feedback I give to people, is the way you progress your track, is try on different experiences. If you're a software [00:52:00] engineer, one of the things I love about the company, is because we have such a great geographical spread,

we're in close to 30 countries around the world, lots of different ... One of the most diverse portfolios as I mentioned, of any gaming company. People can work in lots of different settings, contexts, different games, different teams, different pieces of technology.

What I want to see people do, and what I think is really important in the individual career track, is helping people understand that progression is not about promotion across different levels in the company. Progression is really [00:52:30] about building your portfolio skills and increasing your value, right? Progression comes best from diverse experiences, and I think if leaders are listening to this, the best thing you could do, is start to articulate what are the different experiences you can provide to your people that really challenges them and helps them grow.

Jacob Morgan: In other words, if I'm a software engineer, I've been doing something for a year, I've mastered that. Now instead of just saying, "Hey, I've done that really well, helping manage other people," and now it's more like okay, well here's a new technology that you can [00:53:00] learn.

Mala Singh: Here's a new technology, or apply what you've learned in a very different context and setting, right? Apply it to a different problem, it's that kind of thinking that I think becomes really, really important. Back to what I was saying is really important to people, it's having a leader that you report to who really cares about that for you, and is helping you think through okay, what's the next setting you can apply that particular skill to? Challenge your application of that skill and see how it resonates in a different area, right?

[00:53:30] I think that's where the power around career development comes.

Jacob Morgan: The employees feel like they're progressing, I'm assuming sometimes you might be paid more, sometimes maybe I don't know, does a job title change?

Mala Singh: Yeah, and here's the thing, right? I think the mistake that a lot of organizations have made, is all organizations that manage their workforce, need an organizational hierarchy, right? There's this underlying hierarchy of, "Levels," within the company, and I think the mistake that we've made, is focusing [00:54:00] progression on transitioning from level to level to level, as opposed to building a broader portfolio of skills. That does not mean, and I think we should pay people based on the attainment of skills, and the value that they're bringing, and happy to create titles if that helps people feel a sense of progression, right?

Titles are cheap, it's no big deal to get creative on a title. I think we've fallen into this trap as a function a lot of companies [00:54:30] of helping people feel like, the only way you progress, is if you change organizational level in the hierarchy.

Jacob Morgan: That is very, very true.

Mala Singh: Yeah, and I think that's a mistake, and I think if we can create this concept of progression and valuing progression. Progression means, who cares if you changed a level, it means that you're gaining valuable skills. You're working in different settings, which make you ultimately valuable. The reason why this is so important for EA is the following, what we're about to go through in the industry, and [00:55:00] our strategy around creating a player network of incredible content that's available often accessed through subscription, maybe powered by the cloud, right?

Streaming, that's a very different world for video games and interactive entertainment. We believe we're in a position where we can lead that. Well, that's never been done before, so there's not this base of experience. You're not going to go hire a bunch of people that [00:55:30] have done this before, because it's never been done before. What you need is people who can think differently about this new world, and be innovative in how they approach the design of this future.

The best way to get different thinking and innovative approaches, is by constantly changing your context and experiences, which helps you become learning agile, teaches you how to adapt, helps you diagnose situations, and figure out solutions. That's why I believe the diversity of experiences is so fundamental [00:56:00] to how people should grow in the future, certainly for our company.

Jacob Morgan: Yeah, it sounds like the leveling up made sense in a very static, non-changing ... I mean that was what we're used to.

Mala Singh: Yeah, predictable.

Jacob Morgan: Yeah, but in a world that's changing so quickly, that climbing the level just really just doesn't help much. Fun question for you, and this is what do you think non-HR people need to know about HR? There are of course a lot of people listening to the podcast, some of whom are in HR, but some are just entry-level employees. [00:56:30] A lot of them are just managers and leaders that are not in HR, so what do you want to tell all the people out there that are not in HR?

Mala Singh: Yeah, I think when done well, this function really helps power the company through its people, truly. What does done well look like? It's a lot of the things that I described before that the power and value in this function isn't in the compliance of yes, there's a dimension of this that is necessary [00:57:00] in the world in which we operate. There are regulations that govern employment in all the countries in the world, right? There is a component of this job which is the gatekeeper of some of those kinds of things, and I get that.

The real power in this function, is in how deeply the talent in this area understands the business, and what you want to accomplish from that business, and how you lineup people practices that enable you to attract, grow, motivate,

and retain the talent you need. That's fundamentally [00:57:30] an important way to think about what we do in this function. If you're a business leader, and you're not getting that from your function, you should demand it.

If you're an HR leader, and your function doesn't operate that way, you should change it. If you're somebody who's not in this role, and you love the idea of helping people realize their potential, this might be the career for you, right? It really is about stepping back and thinking about all the ways that you can tune the system, and the system meaning the organization that you're a part [00:58:00] of, to enable this great work from people.

Jacob Morgan: Hey, I think it's never been a more exciting time to be in HR.

Mala Singh: No, absolutely.

Jacob Morgan: It's leading all of these themes on the future of work.

Mala Singh: It is leading a lot of these themes on the future of work, and I can't honestly say ... I meet with leaders and CEOs all the time, and the function doesn't have a great reputation, right? I think too many people have approached it in a very traditional way. It's not hiring and terminations and compliance and employee relations and all those kinds of things. Yeah, those are one component, but it is about the philosophy in which you [00:58:30] approach this.

I've been very honored to work with leaders who get this, right? What it makes for is a beautiful partnership, whether it's Andrew as our CEO of EA, or Mariam, who is the CEO of Minted that I had a chance to work really closely with, they got this, the imperative around talent and culture. When you get that as a leader, and then you demand that of your people function, then it enables your people function to rise to that occasion. I feel like that's what we have here.

Jacob Morgan: I want to ask you a couple of questions from LinkedIn.

Mala Singh: Sure.

Speaker 3: [00:59:00] I just want to do a time check. We're just over an hour now.

Jacob Morgan: Yes, okay, cool. First question from LinkedIn is from Richard Rosenow, who's people analytics at Facebook. He says, "EA has made great investments in people analytics, I'd love to hear more from her about how her investing in that team contributes to measuring and understanding employee growth and learning. Any examples of findings would be fascinating."

Mala Singh: Ooh, that's a great topic. We did start making an investment in people analytics probably going back almost five [00:59:30] years ago now. It's this fundamental question of how do you know what you think you know, right? We're now building a culture, not just in the workforce analytics team, which is a lean but

mighty team, but in the entire function we're now selecting for people in all aspects of the function who have an affinity for this work, right? Aren't scared off by numbers and metrics and spreadsheets, but really know how to take that data and derive insights that enable action, right?

[01:00:00] As we think about the body of analytics we look at that inform the talent strategy or the state of talent in the company, it's wide and varied. If he'd love to connect with me, I can share a lot more detail about it, but we're now taking a measurement mindset to everything that we do. We're approaching a lot of our work in the function with an experimentation mindset. Like we talk about the scientific method, right?

Stepping out and saying okay, what's our hypothesis about this? We believe that people [01:00:30] managers will become more effective if we implement these specific learning modules in this way, okay? How do we actually measure that? There are lots of different methodologies to go out and measure something as specific as that. It's the feedback from the participants of the program. It's the feedback from the people who work for them, but then we also look at neutral things, like how are their engagement scores for their team moving over time, right?

What are people saying about their feedback? What do their business results look like? When we put [01:01:00] something in the system, we actually put the metrics in place to say, how would we know that this was effective? Then the people analytics team helps us call those metrics into what I call state of talent dashboards for different populations within the companies. That enables us to look at the health, understand where the issues might be. We're getting much more sophisticated about understanding these things.

I can't tell you how much more effective I am as a leader of people in using that data and information [01:01:30] to frame arguments, right? The data doesn't lie, and so when I approach our executive team and talk about a specific practice I want to change, I ...

Jacob Morgan: What would be an example?

Mala Singh: Oh, so let's talk about talent movement, right? When I came back into the company, one of the pieces of data that I looked at, and I won't quote the exact number for you, because it's a little embarrassing. Despite having an incredibly broad portfolio of games, despite having a wide geographical reach, the number of people that were moving in a way that required [01:02:00] a change in our HRIS system, was less than 10%.

Jacob Morgan: Wow.

Mala Singh: Yeah, and I get where that came from. We have a very strong studio culture and identity, and we know that teams that iterate with each other over time

produce amazing results. That strength overplayed, meant that people felt like they couldn't betray their studio, and raise their hand for a different opportunity. There were times where people felt like the right choice was to leave the company, as opposed to raise their hand for a different experience.

[01:02:30] That was just a very simple data point, we'd never really measured that movement before. We had a really open conversation to say, "Does that feel healthy? Probably not," right? That's an example of where asking the question, how do people move and grow in the company? What data and insights do we have around that? Helped frame an argument for why we have to create more of what we call our internal talent marketplace, right? The sourcing of talent and skills from lots of different geographies and teams.

Jacob Morgan: Yeah, [01:03:00] that's an awesome example. Next question is from [Elotomai 01:03:03] I think, sorry if I'm saying your name incorrectly. She wants to know, "Have you noticed any correlation between training hours and employee engagement? When asking about employee engagement, she says first loyalty and happiness." Any correlation between training and ...

Mala Singh: No, I think when we look at the data, and again go back to the 70/20/10 concept that I shared with you before. If you talk about training as that 10% time in classroom, we don't see a high correlation [01:03:30] between people being able to attend a training program and engagement. The biggest drivers of engagement, are the things that we talked about before, right? People's belief in the company and the mission and the values. The quality of the leader, the quality of the work that they're doing, and their opportunities to learn and grow.

We find that those things are the most important drivers. Where training comes into play, is when it enables a couple of those things, right? It's not directly correlated, it's more loosely correlated. When training experiences help somebody have a stronger manager, then you see [01:04:00] engagement as a result of it.

Jacob Morgan: It makes sense.

Mala Singh: The primary factor is really the quality of the manager.

Jacob Morgan: Last question from LinkedIn, is from Soren Nielsen, "How do you set up KPIs that allow for experimentation and innovation?" He says, "Often times it seems like KPIs are more short-term focused, and revenue focused, rather than long-term and innovation." How do you use KPIs?

Mala Singh: Yeah, so as a company yes, we have our financial metrics, but we actually have a series of what are called [01:04:30] core player metrics, where we look at things like how people play our games, and how engaged they are, and what the feedback is that we're getting from our players. Similarly in the people function,

yeah, we take a look at things like the top line metrics, like attrition, and engagement scores from a survey and so on. We try to go a little bit deeper around this idea of quality of the experience, right?

What the indicators are that help us understand whether people are having a high quality experience here or not. Things like [01:05:00] click rates on communications that we put out, to what degree do people really engage in the information we're putting out there? When we do specific events and bring communities together, what's the health of those communities? How are people engaging with each other? We look at things like the dialogue people are having in some of the different channels, and how healthy and positive is that dialogue?

I do think that from a KPI perspective, we're really asking ourselves the question, how do we understand the health of our workforce? Similarly, [01:05:30] how do we understand the health of our business? It is not just the financials and the traditional metrics, we've really gone beyond that.

Jacob Morgan: All right, so to wrap up, I have a fun just rapid fire series of a fun questions for you.

Mala Singh: Okay.

Jacob Morgan: First one is what's the most embarrassing moment you've had at work?

Mala Singh: When I moved to France, and mistook a word, and was trying to ask for something for breakfast, and ended up asking for something very different, because my French wasn't that good.

Jacob Morgan: All right, if you could be a superhero, who would you be?

Mala Singh: [01:06:00] Let's see, that's a tough one. Of course every woman wants to be Wonder Woman, but I don't know, I think Ant-Man's actually cool. This whole idea of being able to like reduce in size and sneak around and do cool things, and that's just fun.

Jacob Morgan: If you could have dinner with anyone in the world, who would it be?

Mala Singh: Oh, Michelle Obama, I just think she's so amazing. I aspire to have the level of grace that she exhibits every single day.

Jacob Morgan: Yeah, yeah, she'd be a great one. [01:06:30] What's a book that you recommend could be business or nonbusiness book?

Mala Singh: In my industry, you know what I really read last year that I absolutely loved? Was Ready Player One.

Jacob Morgan: Oh, that was an awesome book.

Mala Singh: It was an awesome book.

Jacob Morgan: I haven't seen the movie yet.

Mala Singh: You'll be disappointed by the movie, because the book was so amazing. I'm a child of the '80s, I grew up playing video games in the '80s with my brothers, and there was such amazing throwback. By the way, I didn't even read the book, I listened to it on audible with my three kids, right? [01:07:00] By the way, pro tip, there's swearing that I didn't know about, and they talk about the fact that there is no Santa Claus, so that's how my eight-year-old got confirmation that there is no Santa Claus.

Jacob Morgan: Oh man.

Mala Singh: When you're reading a book, you can edit things out, but when you listen to a book, what's out there is out there. We had such a great time listening to it, and so now my kids are listening to Rush. They're listening to the whole 2112 album.

Jacob Morgan: That is an awesome album.

Mala Singh: Yeah, isn't that cool?

Jacob Morgan: That is cool.

Mala Singh: Yeah, so that was really fun.

Jacob Morgan: Very nice, all right, and last [01:07:30] one for you, if you could get rid of one workplace practice inside of EA tomorrow, or today, what would you get rid of?

Mala Singh: If I could get rid of one workplace practice? You know what it is? I still think people still traditionally look too much at how many hours somebody's spending in a given place to evaluate whether they're really contributing or not. It's not about the hours, it's about the contribution. If I could wipe that out of people's mindsets, and how they think about people's contribution, I'd love to.

Jacob Morgan: If you could implement one workplace [01:08:00] practice, what would you implement?

Mala Singh: If I could implement a workplace practice? We're doing a lot of work around this idea of inclusion, right? The practice I would want to implement, is that inclusion as a concept is in front of everybody's mind in every interaction.

Jacob Morgan: I like it, well that's it. We're all done, where can people go to learn more about you? I don't know if you have a blog, Twitter, anything [01:08:30] you want to mention for EA for people to connect with, please do.

Mala Singh: Yeah, I mean I'm happy to have people connect with me on LinkedIn, and honestly I've kept somewhat of a lower profile. I prefer my work speak for itself, and so you can learn about what we're doing, and the work that I'm helping to lead as a function, based on how we show up as an employer.

Jacob Morgan: Yeah, it's going to be exciting stuff.

Mala Singh: Yeah, so check out our web pages.

Jacob Morgan: Cool, well thank you for joining me, and inviting me to your offices in Redwood City.

Mala Singh: Thanks, it's been fun.

Jacob Morgan: Thanks everyone for tuning into [01:09:00] this weeks episode of the podcast. My guest has been Mala Singh, Chief People Officer at Electronic Arts. I'll see you next week.