

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: Hello everyone, welcome to another episode of the future of work podcast. My guest today is Rebecca Chandler who is the Chief Learning Officer and Global Director of the Learning Group at Steelcase. Rebecca, thanks for taking time out of your day to speak with me today.

Rebecca: Oh, thank you Jacob for having me.

Jacob: So today we're going to be talking about all things related to learning, but before we get started why don't you tell listeners a little bit more about who you are...some background information about you so that we can get a sense of who is Rebecca Chandler.

Rebecca: Alright, wonderful. So, Jacob, I started with Steelcase about three years ago so I joined the organization really to help them think about how to more fully integrate all of their research and insights into becoming a true learning organization and we're about 90% through our transformation. Prior to coming to Steelcase I had worked for other large organizations in multiple industries: healthcare, consumer package goods, pharmaceuticals for companies like Pfizer and Kellogg. And I've spent the entirety of my career really focusing in the organizational development...learning and development areas and have really spent the last, probably, 10 years of my career very, very focused on learning...how people learn and really how we can better leverage all the tools and resources that are emerging, such as more socially connected world, technology, etc...to more fully realize our learning potential.

Jacob: Very cool! And then for people who don't know Steelcase, I know you guys are quite a large organization, but maybe you can let people know a little bit about Steelcase.

Rebecca: Yes, Steelcase is an organization that provides, I would say, more than just furniture for organizations...we really help them solve workplace challenges. And we do that through our research and insights. We do a lot of primary research about human behavior and how the workplace and the environment can really help to shift and change that behavior. We provide furniture solutions in the form of applications that really reflect what we've learned about human behavior and how to help shape and shift that behavior to really solve organizational issues.

Jacob: And how big is Steelcase?

Rebecca: We're about, just less than 14,000 employees right now.

Jacob: Wow...

Rebecca: And we are a global organization, so you know it, in terms of size we're not near the size of many of our competitor, or not competitors, our customers. But we are a very complex globally integrated organization with lots of similar challenges.

Jacob: So what's a day in the life of Rebecca Chandler look like? Are you up early in the morning, straight to the email, cup of coffee, into the office? Or is everyday just something totally different for you?

Rebecca: I think you got it right the first time. The first thing I do typically is check my email for all the things that might have come in overnight from the other regions I support, so Ameia and Asia Pacific, and find out does anything need my immediate attention. I have a global team, so I have team members in those regions as well as key stake holders and customers in those regions. Get the coffee, probably take some conference calls on the way into work and then usually welcomed by a really energetic, highly competent team of people in the Grand Rapids office, too.

Jacob: Very nice, and then I'm assuming work the usual day, come home, eat, relax and then start it all over again the next day.

Rebecca: Yeah, that sounds about right. Late night phone calls, usually, with the other regions through Skype as well trying to figure out, you know, what are some of the business challenges, how can we help solve those...really trying to close the gap on space, but we have not figured out yet what we can do about time.

Jacob: Yeah, time is always the challenge, right. We all wish we had more time. What does a Chief Learning Officer do? So, some people may have never even heard of that job title... didn't even know it exists. So what does a Chief Learning Officer do?

Rebecca: So, a Chief Learning Officer at any organization is usually tasked with thinking about the learning infrastructure and the learning programs throughout the organization and creating enterprise wide solutions as well as infrastructure to support more local custom solutions as well. At Steelcase I would say that's very similar. We focus on what it might take in order to achieve our learning strategy. We're very forward thinking in terms of what we can do to really unlock human promise through our learning infrastructure... what is the curriculum that we're focused on, how do we help people share their knowledge more fully and become the best learners that they can be to really speed the pace of learning within our organization.

Jacob: And I definitely want to touch on some of the cool things that you guys are doing internally, but maybe before we jump into that you can give us a high level overview of how the world of learning has changed. So, if you were to look during the course of your career, I don't know, if you look back 10 years, 15 years, even 20 years, have you seen a very big shift in what it was like to learn in the 90s or even early 2000s verses today?

Rebecca: Yeah and I chuckle a little bit as you asked that question because I think about this a lot because I still see organizations that are doing some of those things, that we still engage in some of those things, but thinking back to the 90s when everyone thought that putting learning online, really automating their current processes by putting them online was going to create scalable solutions for them and help them reduce costs for learning by offering these virtual opportunities for people to learn these—if you can remember back to the term “computer based learning” so CBTs, which then turned into web based training which was WBT, which is now thought of more as a socially connected environment or micro learning-- virtual learning. So all of these things are very different and they’ve evolved over time, but when you go back to the early 90s and the solution was really to automate what we were currently doing... it was what drove me to go back and seek more formal education around how to better leverage technology for learning, for the purposes of learning. So I did go back, I enrolled in a second masters program, never had the desire to get a second masters I really just wanted to learn how to better leverage technology because I really felt like automating learning was not the best use of technology. And I do believe that we’ve come a long way in terms of really understanding human behavior, how we interact with technology and how we can leverage that for learning and how people are already leveraging it and how we might be able to capture that and scale it. So back in the 90s when everything went online we thought, well this is the solution, but what happened was these things became very costly to create, hard to update and maintain...they weren’t engaging. They didn’t really stimulate people’s curiosity...their willingness to engage in learning. No one wants to sit for hours on a computer and engage in module after module of learning alone.

Jacob: I agree. From what I remember from learning, you used to be very much ... You had to sign up for a class, go somewhere to take a class, sit in a room somewhere, somebody ... I mean it felt a lot like school. [00:00:30] It was pretty much identical to that. Today, we're seeing all sorts of like craziness happening around that, but in the corporate world, is that ... I know even in some companies today that it's still very much what it's like. If you want to learn something, you got to register. It's like this whole crazy process. Meanwhile, in your personal life, you could just go type something into YouTube and learn anything you want.

Rebecca: Yeah. You're really touching on something that I think has [00:01:00] been talked about very widely in the learning space for a long time is we have not innovated how people learn. If you look back over 100 years ago at the learning classroom K through 12, even in the corporate environment, if you go back and think about how people were learning, you would see rows of chairs and a teacher at the front of the classroom. You can still see that in many cases today. [00:01:30] That hasn't changed significantly, but I do know that we know more. We're thinking differently. Steelcase is definitely ahead in this area and really trying to push what they know, but there are other organizations doing so as well.

The idea that would be engaging and really stimulate people to do something differently or to drive to performance, we know better now.

Jacob: [00:02:00] Looking at Steelcase when it comes to learning, can you talk a little bit about what you guys have done internally? What's the process like for learning instead of Steelcase if I'm an employee, and I want to learn something new?

Rebecca: We're definitely on an evolution as well, but what it looks like for an employee right now is that we offer a lot around active [00:02:30] learning. We understand that people need to engage in multiple different activities when they're inside of a classroom. Setting in rows, we're not doing that anymore. People may seek a learning opportunity that really aligns more with the future skills like how to think, so Design Thinking curriculum, something that we offer at Steelcase.

They would sign up for this course. [00:03:00] We would engage them in a process that we call Think, Make, Share throughout their learning experience, so giving them an opportunity to either do some pre-work. There's lots of pre-work, or there's a minimal amount of free work depending on the need. How do I then download that content, that knowledge that I need prior to coming into the classroom? Some people call this a flipped classroom.

[00:03:30] There may be opportunities to learn this information virtually as a group. It might be a document. It might be a video, et cetera. Then, inside the classroom, you really want to leverage the time that you bring people together for the biggest return on investment possible, and that is through some hands-on practice with expert feedback. In a Design Thinking curriculum, we would allow them to actually go through a design cycle, [00:04:00] a rapid design cycle at first, to learn the process; and then another one where they're actually trying to solve a problem. They're doing this with coaching and with feedback.

Then, the share piece that I mentioned, it's really about teaching back to solidify that knowledge to cement it for them. There are opportunities to do that either in person or to extend that learning experience for a true continuous learning experience beyond the classroom [00:04:30] by asking them to do some kind of an action learning project afterwards.

Jacob: What's the actual process like because signing up for a course, that's been around for a while? But you guys [crosstalk 00:04:43] way to sign up. I've heard some people talk about like a Netflix for learning and integrating all sorts of crazy technologies in there. How is the actual, I don't even know if I would call it the technology, the system, the platform, whatever it is? [00:05:00] How was all that put together?

Rebecca: Right now, we are in the process of creating learning ecosystems and not just one system, but really leveraging tools that people are using in their daily lives but also our own internal social platforms as well as looking at more innovative approaches to giving people the opportunity to learn and share virtually. We're looking [00:05:30] at learning systems that might provide a niche solution and then pulling all of those together through some kind of a centralized platform where they would all be able to feed data into that like a learning record system.

Our system would be supporting this idea that I might want to learn something one-on-one [00:06:00] or I might want to teach something and push that out to the organization that I might want more customized learning. Part of our solution will have this idea of curating content that's much more accustomed to me. The learning group can remove itself from creating all this content. The learner still has access to content that they need when they need it.

I would say it would be hard to say that there's any kind [00:06:30] of process for learning. Obviously, people log into a system where they go on to a system because that's your central repository, your go-to one-stop-shop, but it really is made up of multiple other systems that can help us push the learning strategy that learning can be closer to the point of work. One of the examples of that is we do spend some time creating [00:07:00] content for the organization around things like product training, I mean products that are specific to Steelcase that's not out somewhere in the open source that people are going to be able to go out and find it.

We do create that during the launch process of a new product. We create those learning assets. We make them small enough that people can consume them at the point of need just enough of learning that they might need in order to complete an action at that point [00:07:30] in time. That process might look like I open an app on my phone. I can easily, with a couple clicks, find product information right before I go in to talk with a customer about a certain product, but the innovation curriculum is an example of a blended learning approach. There may be other opportunities where you're a subject matter expert or you're a thought leader in a certain area and you want to share knowledge. That process might be that you do a micro video of yourself sharing knowledge. You post that information maybe along with extra reading for other people. We create a system where people can share that knowledge, and [00:09:00] it can be pushed out to specific target audiences, or it can be open source for anyone to look and find. There's multiple approaches. I don't know how to truly answer the question about what's the process look like.

Jacob: No. That makes sense. It sounds like it's not only you, guys, creating content for employees, but employees can create content for other employees. It also sounds like you curate [00:09:30] content that you might find on the web. Maybe you find some great instructional YouTube videos or articles. Does that accurately depict to, I guess, the three different approaches?

Rebecca: Yes. That's the learning strategy, absolutely, that we create this environment where everyone is engaging in learning. They're thinking differently about how we consume information and how to leverage that best for learning. They're also [00:10:00] able to now engage in teaching one another. This really is how we're trying to speed the pace of learning and knowledge transfer within our organization.

Jacob: How does that work? Let's say I am an employee at Steelcase. I want to teach people, I don't know, marketing. Do I have to set up a course, do a little five-minute video or how is the [00:10:30] peer-to-peer learning designed?

Rebecca: Part of what the learning group does is create these tools and resources to make this easy for anyone because it can be intimidating to think about why I want to create a learning video or a micro-learning video. I don't really know where to start. I think some people are a little more courageous than others, and they engage in it. Some people try it and [00:11:00] aren't really happy with the results so they never post it. But part of what we do is take the intimidation factor out of that by giving them tools and resources that help them see that, hey, this isn't really that hard.

We have workshops where we call them guerilla-style video workshops where we teach people how to create a micro-learning video or a box pop how to do interviewing using

your cell phone, et cetera, so using the [00:11:30] tools that you have readily available or if we want or if they want to engage in something a little more complex in terms of it's a more complex skill to build. We want to do some hands-on practice.

We have identified activities that help people create their own robust dynamic engaging learning experiences as well, tools, templates, resources. To answer your question [inaudible 00:11:57] marketing and I want to share [00:12:00] a best practice or a how-to, I might download this template that just walks me through here are some things to think about if you want to create a micro-learning video or I might go through the guerilla-style video workshop. By the end of that, I can feel more confident that what I'm creating hits all the key points is going to be engaging. I'm not going to look silly doing it. I've gotten some expert feedback [00:12:30] or I'm using an expert tool. I upload that video into the system or onto our social network. I can share that, get feedback from others. We try to make it as simple as possible.

Jacob: Yes. That's a pretty different concept in learning too because I think learning used to always just be about what the company can teach employees, but now, we've democratized that a little bit so anybody can teach anybody. That's probably a pretty cool thing to see.

Rebecca: It is. [00:13:00] It does require that we help people develop a mindset where it's okay. I think that's through experiences and less about communication and training. It truly is by creating experiences where they can see that it's really not that scary or that hard and making it easy by the use of tools. This whole idea of democratization of learning is something that we're fully embracing. I don't want to give the wrong impression that we're [00:13:30] 100% there because I do think it takes time, but when we see successes and those successes are visible to the organization, you start to see more people opting in by engaging in the teaching. By engaging in teaching more often is basically what I was trying to say.

Jacob: I also really like the curation piece because it's basically like you can find good resources online [00:14:00] and just put them together for people. It doesn't even need to be something that anybody related to Steelcase created it. It could just be like a great video on marketing strategy that you want to put up in there, and then anybody can just access that.

Rebecca: Yeah. This one for me, to be completely transparent, is an area where we're really growing and developing. We are researching right now artificial intelligence and experience platforms that will help us be more [00:14:30] robust in our ability to curate content from all of these external sources because it can be very time consuming for learning professionals to sit down and try and pull all of these resources together.

We have a mixed approach right now. We have some resources that can help us with the curation of content. We also have personnel that are trying to curate content based on specific topics. In the future, what we're looking at [00:15:00] is a fully automated system that can really understand your behaviors, your habit and make recommendations and curate content based on people that you seem to respect because you follow them on social media based on your job title and projects you might be working on or just things that you've looked into or Googled in the past. That artificial

intelligence and machine learning is going to be really critical in the future. [00:15:30]
We're working to get a more robust system in place to support that.

Jacob: It's actually really cool. That was one of the things I was going to ask you today actually is about the role that AI plays in learning. I don't know. If you were to look five, 10 years down the road, you imagined that employees will maybe just log on to something and then the "system" will just know everything about the employee that'll just feed them content [00:16:00] at the right time. You don't know what they're working on and just automatically have access to all this.

Rebecca: Yeah. Why not? That happens today when you go into your Facebook feed already. We know the technology's there We just need to figure out how to create it in a cost-effective way for organizations. I think there are some companies out there that are doing a really great job of it. We've been talking with some of those vendors [00:16:30] about what's on their roadmap because I still think there's opportunity for them to do more, but you're right. Just being able to log on and there it is or it's our ... You don't even have to log on. It's being pushed to your personal device. It might say, "Hey. It looks like you're in the building, and you're getting ready to go to this project that's on your calendar. Here are a couple things you might want to read before you go in."

Jacob: That would be pretty neat. [00:17:00] That would be a pretty cool thing to see. How is the learning directed? It seems like it's self-directed. This gets into one of the questions that I was going to ask you, which is who's responsible for the learning. Is it something that the employer that you at Steelcase basically tell your employees, "Hey, you got to know this," or is it up to employees to just constantly learn new things based on what they got going [00:17:30] on in their lives?

Rebecca: I think it's a mix of both. It definitely requires that the organization really understand where they're going, what's their strategic direction and align learning opportunities that will move their employees closer to that. Understanding if this is our strategy, what are the capabilities we're going to need and what are the gaps, and how do we grow and develop our workforce to meet that strategic goal.

[00:18:00] I do think that's one piece of it. The other piece is what's the culture that we're trying to drive. Innovation is extremely important at Steelcase. We have an innovation curriculum, and people love it. They opt-in to it. It really differentiates us from other organizations. I think that's really important as well, but individuals also need to really take ownership of where they're going to grow and develop and using mechanisms for [00:18:30] getting feedback aligned to where the organization might be going but also what are their career aspirations or even personal aspirations so that they have a better understanding of what they might personally need to be doing, a much more customized approach to growing and developing themselves.

But you can't excuse an organization from not growing and developing their employees [00:19:00] because they really have that responsibility to keep their workforce skilled up to meet their strategic goals.

Jacob: It sounds like it's kind of a combination of both. The reason I ask is because AT&T, their CEO I think it was earlier this year or late last year, basically made an announcement to the whole company that said if you as an employee are not willing to take learning into

your own hands, you don't belong here. He said, "We'll give you the tools and resources. We'll help you. We'll guide you. We'll educate [00:19:30] you, but don't assume that all the learning is going to be just up to AT&T as a company to teach you everything. You need to be more accountable and take more ownership over your own learning."

That was a pretty interesting message. I think more and more companies are starting to embrace that and understand that that's the right approach. The company does some things, but the employees also need more accountability themselves too.

Rebecca: Yeah. We're not going to, obviously, [00:20:00] offer beyond tuition reimbursement, degrees, or for certifications. We can point you in the right direction, but it really is up to the individual to understand, well, where is my profession going and how do I stay current relevant, how do I become that lifelong learner and demonstrate that lifelong learning so that people understand that I'm continuously improving and engaging in my own development. Systems can [00:20:30] help you track that, help you report that, but individuals have to be internally motivated to go after that.

I completely understand what AT&T is talking about. I also believe fully that if you have a strategic goal and a strategic initiative, making sure that you're offering something for your employees to grow and develop towards that goal even if it's just here's the direction that we're going, these are the skills that we need. If it is their position that they want their employees [00:21:00] to go out and skill up on their own to do that, I think that's fine, but we have to make those goals transparent and obvious so people understand them. Maybe it's more around helping people develop a learning mindset, that growth mindset that keeps them going trying to strive for greater skill development.

Jacob: Is there anything else that you think we should touch on about what you guys are doing internally at Steelcase or anything [00:21:30] else that you want to share about how you think about Learning and development? Any programs, technologies, anything else that you want to share about what you're doing?

Rebecca: Well, part of what we talked about I think was the idea that we want to invest in these 21st-century skills. I personally do not want to offer the organization, this course catalog of things around [00:22:00] presentation skills, et cetera. We either hire for those skills or individuals are going to go out, and they're going to find those skills on their own. What we want to focus on is how do we build the right curriculum to help people with those 21st-century skills like Design Thinking, innovation, how to teach, how to learn, problem-solving skills, decision-making skills and giving them the tools and resources [00:22:30] to really fully leverage that for the purpose of better business outcomes.

Jacob: In other words, you're not just trying to have every single topic and on-demand covered. You're very, very focused on the core things of what you're looking to offer.

Rebecca: Yeah. What we design and develop across the organization is really in four buckets. The first bucket really being around leadership. We really feel [00:23:00] that leadership should be something that is consistent across the enterprise in terms of we know what type of leader we want to drive the culture that we're striving for within our organization.

We also want to build things that drive the culture that we're going for so for individual contributors as well, how do they understand the culture, how did they participate and contribute to that culture [00:23:30] and innovation. Innovation is extremely important at Steelcase in developing those methods and mindsets within all of our employees is also across the enterprise.

We develop and deploy from the learning group perspective in those three buckets. We partner with the business in the bucket of what we call functional excellence. In that bucket, you might find things like how do we become a world-class sales organization or how do we [00:24:00] become the smart manufacturing worker of the future. We provide the infrastructure, the tools, the resources, the systems that really support them taking more ownership and accountability of providing that within their function in the organization.

We're not just focused on these course catalogs that really are not aligned to strategic goals. Everything we design [00:24:30] and develop is really about moving the organization closer to its strategic goals.

Jacob: What were the four buckets again? One was leadership. It seems like one was, I don't know what I would call it, like mastery. What were the other two buckets?

Rebecca: It's leadership, culture, innovation, and functional excellence.

Jacob: Functional excellence. There we go. All of your learning programs fit into one of those four things essentially. [00:25:00] I think that's a good framework that other people might be able to use too. I think that's a good starting point for these things. I want to look at three things and how they play into learning. The first is the role of Technology in learning. Maybe we can spend two, three minutes looking at what role do you think technology plays today in the world of learning and development.

Rebecca: Right now, I think that [00:25:30] a lot of the learning and development teams that I talked to, and I talked to quite a few because customers come in and they ask us what we're doing. I think learning systems right now are really just helping learning and development push content to the organization. Some organizations have really taken a step further and thought about, well, how do we really leverage the emerging behavior around a more socially connected world. They are [00:26:00] offering social platforms for people to engage in conversation or there are cohort groups that can come together for a certain topic.

Leadership is a great example. You might have a leadership cohort group online, and technology supports a more distributed learning experience so you don't always have to come together. I do believe that that's where we're at right now across [00:26:30] multiple organizations where we need to go is really thinking about how is technology changing people's behavior in their everyday lives. When you start to look at that, you can start to say, "Wow, they're consuming information a very different way."

They are trying to access information from their mobile phones at the point of need. It changes what you teach because you know [00:27:00] that they also now have access to so much more information that you don't really need to build curriculum around as well. I think that the role that technology is going to play is really for us to understand how

people are using technology to consume information to connect with others. We need to leverage that in our design and development of learning experiences. When I say learning experiences, [00:27:30] I really want to emphasize that because I think experience is going to be a really critical piece. The technology shouldn't hinder that learning experience. It should really enhance it, and that has caused us to also look differently at who were employing on our learning and development teams.

Traditionally, learning and development has had a lot of facilitators, instructional designers that were good at the [00:28:00] ADDIE model, which is Analyze, Design, Develop, Implement, Evaluate. It's a very slow process and e-learning experts who are building web-based training modules et cetera today and specifically in the Steelcase team, we're hiring behavioral psychologists, people who understand human behavior at a level where we can start to think differently about what we're designing to create an experience that really enhances or leverages [00:28:30] that behavior for the purpose of learning.

We have engineers on our team who are thinking about how do we create a learning infrastructure that puts learning at the point of need, at the point of curiosity even, and experienced designers. This is what I was talking about where you've created these great instructionally sound learning assets and then layering an experience on to it because that's what's going to make it memorable for people, [00:29:00] and then design thinkers, people who can really innovate that learning experience. That's the professionals that we're hiring today as opposed to what we were hiring in the past.

Jacob: I love that you use the word experience. I wrote a book on employee experience. Whenever I hear people say that, I get very excited. The technology piece, I think, is important there too because we've all seen. I'm sure people listening to this can relate because chances are, their companies use [00:29:30] all sorts of learning technologies, but so many of them, that at least I've seen, are so outdated and they just look like they were built in the 80s, the 90s if you're lucky. It's crazy that we want people to sit there and figure out these tools and get excited about learning and development when the very tools that they're using are so archaic and so outdated, and the videos have these corporate [00:30:00] little things floating behind them.

It's literally just ... You cannot get excited about some of the learning programs that are out there because you sign into these platforms, and everything about it is corporate 90s. I totally agree. The experience makes a huge difference, but maybe you can talk about when you say experience, is it the design? Is that the course? Is it the interface? Is it all of these things, or what goes [00:30:30] into the experience?

Rebecca: Like I said, when we have the learning asset that we know and we feel good that this learning asset is instructionally sound and we think about we map out, all right, here are all the touch points. Here's the first time they hear about this learning experience. Here's the first time that they engage with their leader [00:31:00] about it. This is the first time that they might be logging into their mobile device or whatever it is. Here's an in-person piece of it. Now, they're back on the job. What are they going to do? We map out that entire process because what we're truly trying to drive is not just an event for learning.

We're trying to drive performance for our organization. We map all of that out. Then, we think about who's doing what [00:31:30] on stage behind the scenes. What might the learner be feeling at that point in time? Are they excited? How do we leverage that? Are they frustrated because, wow, I don't have time for this or, wow, it's only offered here? Then, we think about what is a potential solution to really mitigate those negative feelings and create a better experience for them. Then, we design those solutions into our learning [00:32:00] experiences, if you will.

Jacob: Wow. You, guys, have like a whole, I guess, you could call it a journey map, a learning journey map, which is a pretty interesting thing to think about. I don't know how many companies do that, but that's certainly a pretty interesting approach. I want to talk now briefly, and you alluded to this earlier, the role the corporate culture plays in learning. Maybe we can talk about that for two to three minutes. What kind of [00:32:30] a culture is required to support learning? Why that's important? Any tips that you might have on how to create the right learning culture?

Rebecca: Culture is a really interesting thing for me because we've spent a lot of time thinking about it from an overall HR team, which I'm a part of as well as a learning group in a function and how we support the organization in our culture journey. The [00:33:00] role that culture plays truly is about we believe creating experiences as we've just talked about. We think that's really important for people to understand that or to impact their belief system so that you want to change beliefs, you need to create new experiences, which will drive those beliefs.

We really believe that culture and learning go hand- [00:33:30] in-hand. It's really hard to separate the two. We would like to design curriculum that reinforces the culture. An example of that might be in our leadership curriculum. We believe that empathy is really important. Empathy really comes from our love of design thinking, our love of innovation. We want to understand our users.

In our leadership programs, [00:34:00] we want to incorporate that piece of our culture into how we develop our leaders even. We have this methodology that were a mantra, I should say around, leadership development. Any new leader within the organization, either new to Steelcase or a very first-time leadership role, goes through this curriculum. The mantra is learn before you lead. You can start to see [00:34:30] where we're trying to embed the idea that you need to get to know the people in which you're leading. You need to understand the business in which you're serving and really build empathy for those things before you start to make big leadership decisions which is very different than other leadership programs that I've seen before.

You can see how it aligns with the culture that we're trying to create. We embed that into our learning opportunities. Then, those are the people that go out and really create [00:35:00] the culture for the organization. They learn about it. They experience it. They are now skilled up enough to go out and promote it and be the catalyst for that culture.

Jacob: Do the managers and executives at Steelcase, do they lead by example here? They use the programs or they use the, what I call it, a program or they use the learning modules or, I don't even know what I would call it, the system. [00:35:30] They use the learning system as well. They make it visible and obvious that they're doing it. It's not like they're just telling everybody to do it. They themselves use what they want others to use.

Rebecca: We're really lucky in that aspect. We have all the way up to our CEO who engages in teaching within the organization, but, also, they engage in learning. I have a really [00:36:00] powerful example that I want to share. I don't know if it's too far off course of what you're asking, but ...

Jacob: No. Please share.

Rebecca: I do believe that our leaders are role modeling of learning behavior in the organization. I'm not going to say that they go online and they take courses because I don't think that's even the right learning experience for them. I have seen them in classes. I've actually taught classes where they're [00:36:30] learning a particular skill. I know that they engage in it that way. I also know that they engage in learning, and they're serious about it by putting themselves in the flow of the employees.

You may have read articles about where our CEO talks about our new leadership community space. What's really unique and powerful about this is that our senior executive team used to set on the fourth floor in what [00:37:00] we call the global headquarters building. We no longer have that terminology. We don't even have a building we call headquarters anymore. They've moved over to our learning and innovation center, and they're on the first floor right in the flow of employees.

What this allows them to do is not only take opportunities to teach when they overhear conversations because they're in an open office environment the same as everyone else. They can step out, and they can talk with people, [00:37:30] and share insights, and share knowledge, but it also gives them an opportunity to learn. It really demonstrates that, by being in the flow of the employee population in the customer path, that they're now more in touch with what's happening inside their organization. That, to me, is truly what learning is all about is putting yourself in an opportunity where you're gaining new insights and you are not [00:38:00] disconnected from what you need to know in order to make great decisions for your organization.

I think that's a really powerful example of how it's not about going online or going to a classroom to learn but about putting yourself in the flow so that you are learning all the time. You're not separating yourself and disconnected from those opportunities. It's really powerful to watch in action too.

Jacob: [00:38:30] That actually transitions very well to the next point that I was going to ask you, and that's the role that the physical space plays in learning. Actually, one of the things that I wanted to ask about physical space, and maybe we can touch on this after, is the role that flexible workplace. If you believe, you can be a flexible or remote worker and still take advantage of learning. But maybe we can start off with just the design, the space, the furniture, all that stuff. [00:39:00] What role do you think that plays in facilitating and encouraging learning?

Rebecca: I feel like the luckiest chief learning officer in the world. I'm a little giddy about this. You'll have to excuse me if I get overly passionate, but we work in like a living laboratory. All of the research and insights and new product innovations, we try out on ourselves all the time. We [00:39:30] have this ecosystem of learning spaces and that consist of I need to learn alone. We have products like Brody where it really feels like you're in a first class seat on a luxury airline, and you have the opportunity to be take up very little real

estate to spend time reflecting, to spend time reading doing pre-work or working on heads [00:40:00] down very focused work. You put on your headset. It's very comfortable.

What's interesting about this is it was actually designed and developed for college students. We spend a lot of time studying behaviors at libraries. You would see students pulling together two or three chairs trying to create this isolated space within this large library. Thus, we created this product called Brody. It [00:40:30] is really a self-contained seating that allows you to use your technology and be alone in a more populated area.

We also have our classrooms, which are really designed to flex to the activity instead of trying to get your activities to work within a very fixed space. We have products like node and verb that are really lightweight. They move [00:41:00] very easily. They allow for the instructor to easily shift activities from group work to large classroom work to having them work in pairs without having to leave the room. That's really exciting to know that we have the flexibility within our own classrooms to do those things.

I thought it was interesting because I did [00:41:30] read on the LinkedIn that somebody said, "Well, what are you doing about postures?" Actually, postures, that's a really interesting topic because we spend a lot of time thinking about new postures. We have seating like gesture that can really move and form to your body based on these new postures that we see with people who are holding technology in their hand leaning back or engaging in the use of technology without the aid of a desk, et cetera.

There [00:42:00] are lots of ways that we're addressing space and how to use physical space, height adjustable desks so that you even in a classroom setting, if you want to have a table that is height adjustable so you can create different levels. If you're having more of an auditorium-type discussion, more of a lecture, you can have the back row be taller than the front rows, et cetera, or if you want people [00:42:30] to be able to go from seated position to a standing position really easily, these taller tables actually invite people to use whiteboard space more fully.

Really thinking about the insights that our workspace futures group has gained by just observing and watching and doing that anthropological work, from a learning group perspective, get the benefits of that because we have not just [00:43:00] classroom spaces. We have this whole ecosystem of spaces. I get really excited about that.

Jacob: It sounds like you guys are just playing around with different floor designs and everything all the time, which is pretty cool. You test and see what works and what doesn't and try a different space here, a different desk here and just see how people interact with it.

Rebecca: Yes. Absolutely. Have you been to Steelcase in Grand Rapids?

Jacob: I have not. No. But now, I really want to go.

Rebecca: [00:43:30] Well, you're welcome. We'll have to set up a time to have you come because it is just like that living laboratory of you can walk in one day and see different seating arrangements and different products that we're testing, but you can also see prototypes

that are just made of cardboard and wood. That's how we test an idea. We start small. We learn from that. Then, if it works, we scale it.

Jacob: That's pretty cool. I [00:44:00] know a lot of people are always asking. They say, "We don't have money to test and keep building new spaces and all that stuff," but it sounds like you guys can do it pretty affordably. I mean cardboard and very basic cheap material just to see how people interact with it.

Rebecca: Yeah. Absolutely. In fact, our CEO is testing a prototype for his new office right now. If you were to walk into the space, you would see that it is made out of plywood. [00:44:30] I think they just recently put some glass in there because they're trying to test some soundproofing. There's cardboard on it. It's more like a stand-up, almost looks like something you might see on a train where you walk into this cabin. It's a stand-up, height-adjustable. It has his technology at his fingertips. He can close it if he needs privacy. He can open it up. That's [00:45:00] more inviting for people to come in, but it's really interesting to see the CEO standing in a plywood [inaudible 00:45:05].

Jacob: Very cool. It sounds like as far as flexible work arrangements go, I have to ask because a lot of people are going to be wondering about that, are flexible workers still able to engage and participate in learning or do you think they're a disadvantage?

Rebecca: No. I think they're definitely able to engage and participate in learning. In fact, I think that's the real value of having this real estate dedicated [00:45:30] to learning spaces. You'll start to see more people working from home, working remotely, but they still crave that connection to their workplace. When they come together to learn side-by-side, having this space that's really dedicated to that and that is engaging really is almost seen as a reward for those individuals. They start to crave to come back and just spend time either learning in pairs, learning in groups, and really taking advantage of [00:46:00] that space. It's not a dedicated office anymore, but it is space that's dedicated for them. It's very personal to our employees, but it also gives them flexibility, choice, and control.

Jacob: Perfect. Now, I just have a couple of fun rapid-fire questions that people can get to know you a little bit better.

Rebecca: Oh no.

Jacob: Oh yeah. These are always the fun ones. The first one, what's the most embarrassing moment [00:46:30] you've had at work?

Rebecca: The most embarrassing moment I've had at work, and there's probably too many, so I'm going through the rolodex right now, but I would say that it was probably when we had to dress up or we didn't have to. My team is fun. We decided to dress up with an 80s theme to celebrate one of our co-workers in a work anniversary. He started in 1984. We all went back, took a trip back to 1984. [00:47:00] I had the big goofy hair and the shoulder pads. I had to have a boss or a meeting with my boss that day and the look on his face when he saw my big hair. He, I think, is conditioned to never remark the VP of HR, to never remark about physical appearance. He just looked at me pretty funny. It was just embarrassing to be sitting in this meeting with this giant 80s hair.

Jacob: [00:47:30] That's hilarious. Next one, if you were a Disney character, who would you be?

Rebecca: Buzz Lightyear.

Jacob: I like that. What's a book that you'd recommend?

Rebecca: Are you talking fiction or nonfiction?

Jacob: Anything. It could be business or non-business.

Rebecca: I actually really like The Oz Principle if I'm going to make a recommendation that's more business-focused. I like it because I think it's a really powerful concept that [00:48:00] has been simplified that anyone can digest it.

Jacob: It's called the Oz what?

Rebecca: The Oz Principle.

Jacob: The Oz Principle. Okay. I'm going to check that one out. If you were doing a different career, what would it be?

Rebecca: If I was doing a different career, well, I'm going to tell you today, we went on a field trip at work. I saw the most innovative farming thing that I've ever seen in my life. This gentleman is [00:48:30] a true innovator, true entrepreneur. He has created these. It's like a storage container where he's growing over an acre of vegetables in there and they are amazing. We got to taste them. They taste better. They're cleaner. They are easy to grow. I thought, "You know what? If I had the money to invest right now, I would become a farmer."

Jacob: Very cool. [00:49:00] If you could have dinner with somebody alive or dead, who would it be alive or dead?

Rebecca: Alive or dead, dinner, that's a tough one. Probably Einstein.

Jacob: All right. That's a good choice. Last couple for you, if you could live anywhere in the world, where would it be?

Rebecca: Well, I spent a lot of time thinking about this because I'm from Michigan. [00:49:30] It gets really cold in the winter. You put me close to the ocean where it's between 70 and 85 all year long, I would be happy.

Jacob: The last two questions for you, if you could get rid of one workplace practice, what would it be?

Rebecca: Well, we did. I loved it. Can I just go ahead and say that one because we did get rid of it, [00:50:00] performance management systems.

Jacob: Okay.

Rebecca: We threw that out. I have to say we haven't looked back. We're all happier for it.

Jacob: That could be a whole other podcast discussion. If you could implement one workplace practice, what would it be?

Rebecca: I love this idea that one of my colleagues came up with that she really wants to test [00:50:30] out. We haven't yet done it, but it's this idea of transversal talent and leveraging a system to really help us understand who has skills and capabilities in the organization that could easily transfer from one function to another, from one region to another, and really give people more structure around getting those opportunities and being able to leverage skills and capabilities for multiple things [00:51:00] as an organizational asset. I think that would be awesome.

Jacob: Very cool. Well, Rebecca, you've taken a lot of time out of your day to speak with me, and I'm very grateful for that. Where can people go to learn more about you and Steelcase, anything that you want to mention for people to connect with?

Rebecca: If they want to learn more about Steelcase, please just shoot me an email or connect with me on LinkedIn. I'd be happy to talk more about our programs. We also have a magazine that you can just Google it. It's called Steelcase 360. It's actually just called 360, but if you type in Steelcase 360, you can [00:52:00] find a lot of information and around our research and insights and other things that we're doing within the organization. Like I said, I'm happy to connect and share more with anyone as their questions come in.

Jacob: All right. Well, thank you very much, Rebecca. I appreciate you taking time out of your day to speak with me.

Rebecca: Okay. Thank you so much. It's been a pleasure.

Jacob: Likewise. Thanks, everyone, for tuning in to this week's episode of the Future of Work Podcast. My guest [00:52:30] again has been Rebecca Chandler, the Chief Learning Officer and Global Director of The Learning Group at Steelcase. I'll see all of you next week.

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