

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 Podcast. My guest today is Kimberly Samon, the Chief Human Resource Officer at Weight Watchers. Kimberly, thanks for joining me.

Kimberly Samon: Thank you, Jacob glad to be here.

Jacob Morgan: Today, we're going to be talking about some of the cool transformation that Weight Watchers has been going through to become an experienced company or a technology experienced company, but before we get into any of that stuff let's start off with you. Maybe you can give the listeners a little bit of background information about yourself, what you're currently doing in Weight Watchers, how you got into this role, all that fun stuff.

Kimberly Samon: Yeah great. I've been in HR for quite a while for most of my career, but I consider myself to be a little bit of a non-traditional HR person. I have a law degree and I'm a licensed attorney, an MBA and came to HR quite by accident actually. I thought I was going to go law school and took a detour to pay some college loans and wound up taking a job in HR and absolutely loved it. Went back to school, went to law school and business school and after I graduated I really realized that my greatest impact is in this profession. I absolutely love what I do and I've spent most of my career doing HR. I've done strategy roles. I've done GM roles. I've done legal roles, but I've always come back to HR at the core.

When I had the opportunity to join Weight Watchers which was just about four years ago, I came here because the mission of the company was such a draw to me and to think about really being part of the team that helped solved the worldwide obesity crisis was so attractive and the mission centricity of what we do is something unlike I've ever felt at any other company before.

I joined the team I've been here about four years and I joined in the middle of some very tough times for Weight Watchers. We were not doing well four years ago. The industry was in turmoil. The category was in turmoil and we had some really tough decisions to make about who we were going to be and whether we were going to really be relevant as a brand moving forward. I spent the first two years doing all of what I would consider to be not the fun side of HR.

A lot of reorganizations and cost-cutting and then the last two years I've had the fortune of watching the company really experience the first phase of its turn around and being able to build what I feel are such important practices into an organization.

Jacob Morgan: For people that are maybe not familiar with the Weight Watchers I'm sure that's a small percentage. In fact, I'm sure many of the people listening have either tried Weight Watchers or know somebody that's using Weight Watchers, but for the small percentage of people that are not familiar with the company, can you give us a sense of what Weight Watchers does? How many people work there, just any background information that would be helpful?

Kimberly Samon: Yeah. Absolutely. I'll tell you what Weight Watchers was and then what we are in becoming. Weight Watchers really was a brand focused on weight management and we did that primarily through two avenues. We did it through our online offering so people could sign up and get weight management services online and understand how to eat in a healthy way.

We teach nutrition, we teach behavior change. We're not a diet and a lot of folks believe we are a diet, but we're not a diet. We are a healthy way of eating and so we've morphed to that into really a healthy way of being. Not only do we have weight management at our core and we help folks understand the nutritional science and the behavioral science around maintaining a healthy lifestyle through good eating habits.

We also now focus on activity and we focus on mindset. We understand that in order to maximize the weight equation, if you will, other things have to be present and you have to have an active lifestyle and you also have to be in the right mind frame in order to maximize your weight loss if that is your goal. The company started, as I mentioned, in pure weight management and now we're moving into more of a well-being brand.

Jacob Morgan: Very cool and how many people work at Weight Watchers nowadays?

Kimberly Samon: 18,000 approximately globally. We have the largest number of folks in the U.S. and the remaining folks are spread out in nine different countries.

Jacob Morgan: It's quite a large brand. You guys actually have way more people than even I thought. Then for your role specifically, what is it that you do at Weight Watchers? What does a Chief Human Resource Officer do?

Kimberly Samon: Yeah. That's a great question. HR folks come in a lot of different flavors. I do all of what I would consider to be the traditional HR type of roles.

I have a team that does compensation and benefits, total rewards, talent acquisition, organizational effectiveness and development and really the day-to-

day business strategy working alongside our GMs to help them maximize their business performance through people performance.

I have a global team around those different areas and we really ... I think my role and our team's role is to help leverage the talent in the organization so the talent can be the best they can be and the company can perform the best they can perform.

Jacob Morgan:

Great. Before we dive into some of the kind of specific topics around Weight Watchers, I thought maybe we could focus a little bit on you for a couple of minutes, because a lot of listeners to the podcast are now very interested in learning more about the guest and what does a typical day look like for them? Are there any specific routines? What do they do during the course of their life that helped them become successful and kind of reached the pinnacle of their careers? Why don't you just spend a couple of minutes getting a sense of what is a typical day in the life of Kimberly looks like? Maybe you can walk us through kind of you wake up, I mean what is your day look like from there?

Kimberly Samon:

Yeah. That's great and I love that we're saying a day in a life when from the time I wake up because I have a really strong belief that we can't be a worker at work and a mom at home and a spouse at home. We bring our whole selves to our lives no matter what part of the life or the day we're engaging in.

I'll wake up probably most mornings around 6:30 and I'll go at the gym and I will do either weights or cardio training. It's just something that I like to do for me, get something in the right headspace for the day. I'll spend some time with my two girls before I go off to work and then, I live in New York City so I take the subway to work, and arrive at the office usually between 8:30 and 9:00 and a typical day for me consists of a lot of meetings, which I think is typical for most of us these days. Right now a typical day consists of a lot of envisioning what our future looks like.

We are in the middle of what we're calling our brand transformation and so a lot of thought leadership and brain power is going to how will Weight Watchers show up in the future and that's super exciting for me and my team because we know the talent component is a shoot piece of that.

I'll be engaged in meetings on for instance, I just got out of a meeting on how do we deploy our new branding work what we're calling our Impact Manifesto to the organization and how we align teams in order to ensure that the new direction of the company is understood by everyone, our goals to achieve as a company and that we're really putting everything we do through the filter of this new Impact Manifesto.

I will participate in conference calls, all the typical things executives do, but truly the highlight of my day is to have touched bases with my team and my peers,

solving problems, understanding what's going on in the organization, figuring out new and different ways of doing things and really connecting with people.

Weight Watchers, as you may or may not know, is a really strong community of members. We have members worldwide who connect through our various channels including an act we have called Connect, but we mirror that same connection in house and we put a premium on and spend a lot of time as an organization connecting with people having frequent touched points, making it a point to not send short with their emails, but actually have face-to-face conversations and really understanding each other and how we're going to move forward as a team.

Jacob Morgan: Sounds like a pretty exciting day and lots of things going on there. Is there a routine for you or practice that you think has had a great impact on your life or career? Like is there something that you have done for several years that you're just kind of like, I can't start my day without this. This has had a huge impact on my career, on my growth, on my development.

Kimberly Samon: Yes. I'm laughing because I've been called a bit old school in this regard, but one of the things that I got hooked on from my first year out of college and my first job actually was the system of a Franklin Planner. I don't know if you're familiar with one.

Jacob Morgan: No, no, I'm not.

Kimberly Samon: Yeah. It's an organizational system that takes you through planning your day and your week and there are electronic versions of it, but the portion I like is largely paper-based and every evening I look at the planner, I look at the outlook calendar. I see what's coming up. I make sure I'm prepared. My Franklin planner is with me always. I understand what the priorities are for the day. I keep a checklist and I take those priorities off and there actually is a lot of science behind those checklist producing positive chemicals in your brain that make you feel you want to do it again and again and really leverage the efficiency of the system of the Franklin Planner.

I still walk around with my up-to-date version of the Franklin Planner, but I've been called a bit of a dinosaur in that regard, but it's something that has always worked for me. I'm super organized. I juggle a lot, I mean, a mom and an executive and all those things that a lot of people try to juggle today and candidly I would be lost without it.

Jacob Morgan: Sticking to the pen and paper, I like it.

Kimberly Samon: Yeah. Yeah.

Jacob Morgan: Even for me when I'm planning stuff or trying to come up with ideas for images and what not, I always kind of doddle them out on paper first because it's, I

don't know, I just find it a little bit easier. I totally understand where you're coming from.

Now, a lot of people would look at your career and the CHRO is kind of the highest level that you can achieve in HR profession, you're working at the big large respectable company and so you've essentially reached kind of the pinnacle of your career or you're right up there. If somebody were to ask you, what did you do during the course of your career to allow you to become successful? Are there any specific things that you think you can point to that allowed you to kind of reach this position that you're at today?

Kimberly Samon: Yeah. I think Jacob, one of the biggest things that I attribute my success to is I've always, first and foremost try not to think HR first and so I believe all of us on a team, be it a management team, an executive team, our role is to run the business and I might come at it with an HR orientation versus our CFO who might come out of it with a finance orientation, but fundamentally we're all business people. Putting the business first has always been really important to me and then understanding how we leverage the people through the business is also very important to me.

The other thing that I would say is I have put a lot of emphasis on understanding the financials and not only the financials of the business of what we do, but also the capital structure of the company and understanding intimately how that all interacts and that I felt has made me a much stronger HR person because I can talk to a GM or CFO or president or a CEO about the business of the business in very granular terms and understand what I need to do from an HR perspective in order to impact that.

Jacob Morgan: It sounds like even if somebody is not an HR and let's say they're in marketing for example, one of the things that probably any employee can do a better job of doing is understanding how to communicate to executives or business leaders kind of like in their language or to see things from their perspective a little bit and maybe the way that you have those conversations will change the way that you're perceived, will change kind of the opportunities that might be able to unlock for you, would you say that's a kind of a fair way of explaining it?

Kimberly Samon: I would. I absolutely would and I would also say that the third part that I put emphasis on and always have since I was in my early days and not just because I'm in HR, I think this is a success criteria for leadership is, I deeply care about the things I choose to get involved with and so whether it's the company that I choose, the particular projects that I work on, but really most importantly to me is the people who work with and around me.

I think I bring an element of authenticity to the job, always have and I share that with my teams and my people. I'm hoping I think I can't be the judge of it that this brings an element of trust and camaraderie and loyalty that I feel I've had throughout my career, but I don't think you get that unless you're willing to put

yourself out there, show people that you're vulnerable because people don't trust perfect.

When you're going through a common struggle and you're sharing what's going on not only in your work day but in your life that resonates with people and they understand you're a real person and they begin to see you in a different light. That's always been important to me in how I manage and relate to people and I think it is one of the factors of my success.

Jacob Morgan:

Very, very glad you brought that up. This whole notion of authenticity and vulnerability and empathy at work, we keep hearing about how important and crucial this is and we also keep hearing about how much companies and just employees in general struggle with it. How do you do that as far as being authentic and vulnerable and empathetic? Is there something you do, for example, when people talk do you just make more of a conscious effort to listen first, like are there any practices if the listeners can take away from this podcast to be more authentic and vulnerable and empathetic at work?

Kimberly Samon:

I would say yes to the listening piece. I think we all have to be good listeners, right? We can't be good leaders if we're not good listeners. Whether someone is talking to about the struggles they're having with a project or the struggles they're having at home, which might flow over into work and wanting to be mindful of that, listening is absolutely table stakes.

I think for me beyond the listening it's really understanding what each person around me and on my team needs as an individual. Sometimes we tend to commoditize a workforce and we really overlook what is special and unique about each person and that's special and uniqueness comes from a source and it comes from their source of truth whatever truth that may be and understanding what that is in each person. I believe is so critical in really building that relationship and having them feel like they're cared for as a person and not as a worker. I don't know if I answered your question, but..

Jacob Morgan:

No, you did and I love the way you kind of ended it right, understanding your employees or your peers not just as workers, but as individuals and as people, I think that is a big shift that we're starting to see. No, I mean that makes complete sense.

Now, earlier you talked about this issue of balance, right? I mean you're a mom, you're a spouse, you have a fulltime job obviously, you're an executive in a big company, and I know that balance tends to be a big issue not just for executives, but for everybody especially in this connected world that we're constantly in. How do you maintain balance? I've heard stories of executives that only carry around flip phones. I've heard stories of other people that don't have meetings on certain...that people are just trying different practices to kind of keep their sanity. Is there anything that you do that allows you to maintain your kind of balance and making everything work together?

Kimberly Samon: Yeah. I'd love to address the concept of balance because I actually, I don't think there's such a thing, right? Something gives in some areas of our lives because we are so connected and we are so busy, but what I would say is I feel my life is very integrated. This concept of work life balance is now being replaced by work life integration. Because we are connected 24/7, we work at all hours of the day, but we also have to be able to give ourselves permission to not work at all hours of the day. I'm very good about being off when my children are off. When they're on school breaks and we can travel as a family I'm very, very good at that. I haven't actually missed one of their school breaks. I'm very good at when my children have school events, I'm at their school events. I'll leave in the middle of the day and I'll go their events.

Now, I might that evening beyond email late at night but that's the integration piece for me. For me it's always more important that I fit it in on my terms when possible than trying to maintain this notion of balance because I think that's very difficult to do in a connected world.

Jacob Morgan: Now I couldn't agree more. I always say that connectivity doesn't imply availability so it sounds like you're...

Kimberly Samon: I like that.

Jacob Morgan: You're living there so that's fantastic. All right. Let's talk a little bit about some of the stuff that Weight Watchers is doing. One of the things that you mentioned you talked about kind of traditional HR. I'm wondering is there a distinction nowadays between traditional and nontraditional HR and if so how much of your time would you say you'd spend on the traditional stuff versus maybe like the nontraditional stuff and I suppose that could be the employee experience, the kind of the new stuff that's starting to emerge, how do you balance that?

Kimberly Samon: Yeah, that's a great question. I did use the term traditional and the notion of traditional HR is morphing. The HR profession has gone through every facet off right personnel to HR to integrate it with the business to a center of excellence, right? We keep saying this evolution of and I really feel like companies are out of place now where they're understanding that, I don't even like to call it HR quite frankly. Whatever this talent component is, whatever label we put on it of talent and culture and people that it is so foundational and fundamental to the success of everything we do that the conversation has shifted.

I'd love that you asked about the employee experience and that is something that typically in organizations didn't get a lot of play and now it's getting a lot of play and it's something that is very near and dear to my heart. As I mentioned to you earlier when I first joined Weight Watchers, we were not in the best position from a consumer perspective. We were going through some troubling times and all of our resources were dedicated to consumer phasing fixes.

Fixes on the app, fixes on the program, and now that we've turned our corner and we still have a lot left to do, but we're in a much better place. We're redirecting a lot of those resources internally and one of the big projects that we are working on is the employee experience and the employee experience to me starts at the first touchpoint with a candidate or a when a candidate first becomes aware that Weight Watchers might have an amazing opportunity that they want to be a part of. We haven't yet gotten there but where I see the experience dare I say end or wane a little bit is I'd like to start an alumni association for former Weight Watchers employees.

This organization, Jacob, is just unbelievable in terms of the way people connect with one another and form community. We really mirror our consumer culture and in our consumer culture we bring a lot of people together who have a common struggle and we introduce them to one another and they form connections that really help them sustain their journey, their weight loss journey, their well-being journey and that belief is over and to help our employee culture and folks here have such a high degree of connectedness and when people leave the organization for whatever reason, I feel like they need to be part of the club still because that's just who we are at Weight Watchers where we're people first and employee second.

As we analyze this whole continuum of employee experience I don't see an ending with someone resigning or leaving. I see there being a much far reaching community than we've been treating it right now. How that looks? I'm not quite sure we're still working on it, but it is something that I think we'll be built into our plans.

Jacob Morgan:

What is it like to work at Weight Watchers? I know that's kind of a maybe a tough thing to answer because people can visualize your office, they don't know about the perks or the benefits, but maybe you can just give us a sense of ... if we were to walk inside of a Weight Watchers right now and all of us listening to the podcast, we're applying for a job and we got the job, what is it like to work here? I mean is it open spaces? What's the leadership style? Are there any kind of unique quirky things that Weight Watchers does around culture or people that maybe other companies don't do? Anything that you think will help us paint the picture of what it's like to work it at Weight Watchers.

Kimberly Samon:

Yes. I'm going to tell you my experience and why I took the job and then I'll tell you what I've observed since then. I was interviewing. I was moving from another city back to New York and had a bunch of other job offers and this actually came to the party quite late and when the recruiter approached me about Weight Watchers, this was four years ago and I thought, hmmm, brand is a bit outdated, I'm not sure if it really resonates with me and I was talked into coming on the interview which I did and I'm so thankful the person talked to me into it.

When I got here really the mission of the company is so centered that everything we do that you can't help but feel it when you walk in the door and

hearing the problem to solve and when I say the problem to solve the well-being and obesity issue was just fascinating to me, but then for me also the problem to solve was how do we get this brand back on the right footing.

They had me at go for both of those quite frankly. But as I met members of the executive team, I also saw the authenticity that I spoke about earlier and I saw people really wanting to do good and do well. In a lot of corporations you don't have that but that permeates the culture here and once I got inside, I felt it, but from the outside I don't think I would have felt it particularly four years ago based on my notion of the brand, which has changed considerably.

The physical environment is actually pretty cool. It's nothing that I again would have thought about Weight Watchers being. We're in a converted warehouse in Chelsea. We have big open spaces. We have cafes. I put a gym in it a couple of years ago. We have gathering spaces and again we're trying to, in our workspace, really support how we are as a company in forming spaces where people can interact and communicate and form community.

We have a fantastic roof deck and we do lots of events up there. We have yoga classes. Very candidly, we do a lot of drinking here. We have lots of happy hours and celebrations and we do things that people want to be part of it and we try to get folks outside of their own functional area to interact with one another.

We also do things like and I mentioned earlier we recognize that you bring your whole self to work. There isn't this notion of mom or daughter or spouse or worker, your whole self shows up at all of these things. We try to involve families as much as we can.

We do three family events a year and we do a take your parents to workday in November every year and folks get to bring their parents in to showcase what they do and the company and we started that event three years ago and it's been hugely successful. We'll highlight a meeting. We'll do some healthy cooking classes. We'll educate the parents or the siblings, in some cases, on what we do at Weight Watchers and it also gives the parents such a proud moment looking at their children and everything they've accomplished and it gives our employees such a proud moment to showcase what they do for the company to their parents. That's one of the events we do.

The second event we do is bring your child to workday and we do that in April when the National Day is and we have a whole program setup for the children, lots of arts and crafts, healthy education around food and eating.

Then in the January, February timeframe it's coming up in February this year, we do celebrate your significant other. Our busy season in getting ready for our January launch every year is the fourth quarter. Folks are working very long hard hours to make sure our programs are a success in January.

We want to thank all of the spouses who have work widows, I hate to use that term or don't get to see their spouses for a long period of time or not as much because they're so committed to our members in what we do. We bring them in and have a celebration for them. We might do wine tasting or we might do a dinner. We thank them for sharing their spouse with us and for understanding that the fourth quarter is a hard time of year. The worker, the employee can't be successful without the support of the family around them.

Jacob Morgan: I love that. I mean, it sounds like listening to the way that you're talking [inaudible 00:31:16] sounds like you guys are 18,000-person startup. You're doing a lot of the beautiful spaces. The drinking it's not as if people are just like getting wasted and tumbling over each other obviously there's a level of accountability and responsibility on behalf of the employees. We're starting to see that that's kind of, if you want to have a glass of wine while you're working, if you want to have a beer after work, like that's fine. You would do that anyway. You might as well do it around your peers and coworkers and maybe that will lead to some interesting conversations and chats.

Kimberly Samon: Yeah. Jacob, I couldn't have said that better. Folks here are ... we're not that getting wasted crowd. We are so responsible. We look at how we interact with one another. We're a very respectful culture and it's not drinking for the sake of drinking it's sharing a drink with someone, socializing, getting to know each other and making that all part of the work day and making it easy for people to connect instead of having to go someplace else to celebrate.

Jacob Morgan: Yeah. I mean, I'm all for it. I think it makes a lot of sense and it's part of this blurring of work in life that we're starting to see. Even just a lot of the designs of company offices, we're starting to feel a little bit more like home just the way that their designed and built, couches and lounge areas. It's kind of like you want to hang out there a little bit. I think that that's great, encourages, and serendipity and collaboration. I think it makes a lot of sense.

How do you scale that though? You mentioned your headquarters in Chelsea in New York but you have 18,000 people around the world. Does every Weight Watchers office do the same thing at the same time on the same day or how do you scale that globally?

Kimberly Samon: Such a great question and we're having a lot of these discussions now. On the cultural connection stuff the type of things I just described, each region has a team that is responsible for doing things that resonate with that local officer within that country.

In Sweden, for example, we have a midsummer's feast which is very cultural in Sweden. The entire office has a luncheon and everyone takes off for the rest of the day and it's just a fantastic event. I've had the privilege of being over there while they've been hosting it. That might look different in Australia or some of our other locations but every country has a group that is responsible for keeping the community alive within the company.

We're having right now a lot of discussion on how we show up as a new well-being brand and how we show up globally and democratically to a lot of folks that maybe we wouldn't have before. What I mean by that let me give you an example, we have a small gym we put in this building but we have critical mass here and not all of our locations do or their buildings aren't able to accommodate health clubs.

In those instances we have to think through strategies on how we can replicate, pardon me the intent, but maybe execute it differently. Instead of building a health club in every location, which may or may not be feasible, we would give folks a health club allowance where they're able to go to health club and the company would pay for it.

As we think about building out this global wellness agenda, which we're putting a lot of thought to you now, we are thinking about what's important to us as a company, what common experiences we want all of our employees to experience and then how we execute that maybe slightly differently in every country.

Jacob Morgan: I like the different examples especially the midsummer's feast. Sounds good.

Kimberly Samon: It's fantastic. I got to wear a flower crown and everything. It was wonderful.

Jacob Morgan: Yeah, it sounds like that'd be a lot of fun. Some people assume that this might say, oh my God this sounds it cost a lot of money. The office space costs a lot of money even just to provide alcohol costs money, food costs money, gym costs money. How do you I guess justify the expense or how do you even get budget for it? How do you get approval to do these types of things? I get this question a lot from a company that say, we want to do this but like how do we convince anybody or how do we get money to build a gym or to do a feast or to do like a whole day event because these things aren't cheap. How do you plan for that? How do you get budget for that? What's that process like?

Kimberly Samon: Yeah. I would say from a Weight Watchers perspective, those conversations tend to be easier for me because we are all about well-being, right? The example of the gym, right? How could we not have a gym, right? We're all about healthy lifestyle as a consumer brand and we have to be able to mirror that brand internally.

Those conversations tend to be a little bit easier for me. The cost of doing some of these things though Jacob it's not as expensive as people think. We went through hard times as I mentioned and budgets were tight but the one thing we didn't do is we didn't give up all of these activities that I've been talking to you about because we know how fundamental they are to us as a brand but also to what employees expect and want when they come to work. How that translates into satisfaction engagement longevity, all of those things that have benefits to the company.

I think most companies are recognizing. I'll date myself a little bit but when I started out, I work for a company in New York City that had an onsite doctor and grocery store and gym and I don't mean in the lobby level of the building, I mean as part the company. cafeterias and dining rooms within the building. That was pretty standard. Then the economy changed quite a bit and companies changed their position and we went through this whole remote worker phase and pushing people out instead of drawing them in.

Now, I think we're seeing a recognition that maybe that way and maybe not with all the cost associated, sometime yes sometimes no, is really beneficial to the organization and it's what employees are demanding. Employees want to connect with people and one another. They want to be connected to something greater than themselves. They want to work for companies that have a purpose and a mission.

A lot of companies are rethinking both their real estate and people strategies to check some of those boxes and to work or bring work to folks in the way that they're going the best consume it and it's not always sitting by yourself on your dining room table trying to get some work done when you rather be in a corporate office that provides you with community, it provides you with nutrition, it provides you with some information on mindfulness and certainly activity.

When you think about how companies are looking at well-being these days they're really looking at the physical environment. Financial well-being is really, really important now, social well-being and emotional wellbeing. Those strategies I think we're going to see get even deeper in the coming years as companies come back to where they were I think back in the day when I started.

Jacob Morgan: Are you guys at Weight Watchers doing something around each one of those currently or are you planning on doing something around those?

Kimberly Samon: I would say the one that we haven't tackled yet, but it's in the works, is the financial well-being. The physical space absolutely, we have like I mentioned, great space here and we're looking for spaces that are going to accelerate the well-being environment. Social, I described to you all the social connections and how we're doing that and then emotional as well.

We do yoga classes. We have mindfulness training. We have EAPs. We do a lot to help folks navigate through some of the tough times in their lives. The financial piece isn't one that we've implemented yet but we have had several discussions and we know that that will be an important part going forward.

Jacob Morgan: What do you say to some people and there are some kind of traditional executives, traditional workers out there that hear some of these things and they say, give me a break. Mindfulness, yoga, like I remember when I just had to show up to work and work 10 hours a day and I would just be happy to get

paycheck and go home and now, it's like free food and bring your dog and we'll do yoga and we'll do mindfulness. Do you ever get anybody that says, "What is going on with the workplace?" Like how do we get this point where it's no longer just about work? It's about like companies are therapists and companies are gyms and there are catering companies, like how did we get to this point and do you think it's worth for companies to do this?

Kimberly Samon:

Yeah. I would tell you I don't get any of those question here Weight Watchers because again what we do our external product offering and our internal culture merry up very closely. Folks here understand the science behind healthy habits and things like mindfulness or well-being. That's again from my perspective as an HR person, I don't have to convince anyone internally of the benefits because we're very studied on that and that's what we do in our consumer brand.

In terms of the general commentary, yeah I would say I do get quite a bit of surprise but I would say surprise and delight from most folks that I talk to about what we do. Most of those surprise and delight comments are something like, wow I wish my company did that. I would say from all levels from people in management and all the way down to frontline employees. I do think there's always going to be naysayers but this next generation and current generation of employees, we know we studied it, right? We know what millennials want and what they think. We know what's important to them and we know what will be a draw from an employer of choice perspective.

We can, as employer say, we're not going to do it or we don't believe it has benefits. One, I do believe it has intrinsic and extrinsic benefits. But two, if we don't, the war on talent isn't going to be one that we will win here. We have to create spaces and purpose-driven organizations that people want to be part of.

Jacob Morgan:

It almost seems like nowadays, well you let me know if this sound silly or not. But in the past, it seems like companies didn't really need to make that much of an investment in order to attract people. Like if you look back 30 years ago even 20 years ago, company like GE and these established brands, it was sort of like you can rely on your brand and everybody would say, "Oh my God yeah I want to work for GE or Microsoft," and that was it. The company didn't really need to make much investment in terms of its people. It was kind of like we have a job, we have a good brand, you want a job, you want to come work for us, I'm like, let's make it work.

Today, companies are really having to make so much investment in their people and they can't just rely on their brands anymore and competition is coming from everywhere. It just feels like a very different kind of organization like an evolution of what the company is supposed to look like and do. I don't know if you would agree with that.

Kimberly Samon:

I would absolutely agree with it. I also would look at the changing times or forcing changes all around when people used to join the companies you spoke off before the GEs of the world, they did so with the intention of staying there

their entire careers. They would stay there whether they were promoted or not in many instances. It was not looked upon favorably to and I'm doing air quotes "job hop."

When we look at what really attracts employees today, it's not employment for life, its purpose, it's the opportunity to be part of something greater. It's the opportunity to be a part of a community and to have meaningful relationships at work. It is career development and not only advancing but really learning and being part of something bigger than themselves. That's a very different headspace and a very different approach in the employee than the employee even of 20 years ago.

I agree with what you're saying but I think generationally if companies don't change to match the thinking of this next generation of workers, they're not going to get the talent that they think and I will say Jacob, even if we think it's a fad because there are things that come and go but the price of not doing it is not something that I think most companies would want to pay. I also believe, and this is my personal opinion, that everything you and I have been talking about is not a fad. I think it's the way people are orientating to the world and I think we have to pay attention to that.

Jacob Morgan:

Yeah, I couldn't agree more. Are you ever worried and this is something that I hear quite a bit when I speak at various conferences and events somebody always raises their hand and always asks this question of, what happens if we invest so much time and energy in learning and in spaces and perks and food and people leave like they still only stayed for a year or maybe they stayed for two years.

Do you think that's a problem or is the investment in these things to get people to stay longer or to do a better job while they're there, because for me that seems to be something that a lot of people are trying to figure out. It's sort of like, we want people to stay longer. How do we get them to stay for five years and 10 years? Are you at all worried that you make these investments and people still don't stay there or is that not the purpose of investing in these things?

Kimberly Samon:

Yes. That's such a fantastic question and I get it quite a bit. I would say that the answer is both. We hope that people will stay longer but we really want to make their time here the best they can be while they're there, while they're here, pardon me.

First and foremost our employees are also consumers. Their experience here is going to be talked about outside of the organization and we hope folks will walk away from Weight Watchers and say, "You know what, something better might have come along." "But ma'am, that company was really pretty great when I was there." I will tell you we actually have a lot of what we call bounce backs. People they work here, they get enticed by something else and then within a

year or two they are asking to come back and in most instances we welcome them back because they understand the essence of who we are.

There are lots of steps I could site on tenure within our own organization. Weight Watchers tends to be a highly tenured organization but our fastest growing segment of our employee population has been in the tech and product space and we know that tech folks in particular aren't particularly geared towards long tenure today. We know that that tenure and that group is less and that's okay with us. We still want to provide and experience for them that we would be proud of and that they would be proud to tell their friends and family about regardless if they stay a year or 10 years.

Jacob Morgan: I love that response. You hope they will stay longer but at the end of the day I mean really what you're trying to do is create great experiences for them and you're right a lot of these employees are consumers so whether you work in Apple or a Google or Uber or a GE if you have that great experiences or those experiences there you likely might be a consumer of that brand and tell your friends about it. Whereas, if you just leave angry, you're like, oh God I'm never going to buy another like Apple product ever again.

Kimberly Samon: Right.

Jacob Morgan: I think that's something that we oftentimes forget so I'm glad you brought that up. One of the other things you talk about was that when you started at Weight Watchers, it was a very outdated brand. I think it started in what 1963 is that when Weight Watchers was created?

Kimberly Samon: Yup. Yup.

Jacob Morgan: It's not even like that old of a company. There are companies that were started off in like the 1800s and even before that. I'm curious, what is the process of kind of updating the brand because Weight Watchers, as you mentioned, was a lot of in person meetings and discussions, it was kind of like a very traditional gathering so to speak. How are you transforming Weight Watchers and are there any other lessons that people can take away from this for their own brands where they're trying to update as well?

Kimberly Samon: Yeah. To your point it was a meeting space business and then we had an online business. If you don't want to go to a meeting and you wanted to get our weight management services through our online offering, you could. But we were really slow to the party on apps and we were really slow to the party in understanding how the category was going to shift around what we called DIY, Do It Yourself competitors.

About five years ago or six years ago, folks at least in the weight category thought, "You know what, I don't really need to pay money to go to a meeting be a Weight Watchers or any other type of weight management service. I can

download a free app and try to lose the weight myself." We were not prepared quite frankly for that change in the way people thought. We also weren't prepared for the more holistic view that people took towards health and wellness versus weight in particular.

In the last three years, we've really try to modernize the brand to reflect consumer thinking around weight versus health, around weight loss versus activity, around how mindfulness place into it, around well-being and holistic thinking and healthy eating. That's been a lot of what the consumer program has morphed into.

Then you've see in our recent launch of free style, which is a new way of looking at your day and how you track points and how you educate yourself on healthy eating and it's been just doing great for us. That's one way we've modernize it.

The other way we've modernized it is we had very antiquated technology platforms which really inhibited our ability to move quickly when the consumer demand shifted so much and DIY apps begin to emerge.

The first couple of years I was here. We were knee deep in what we called our tech transformation. We worked really hard to not only upgrade the systems we needed to compete effectively but also to get the right talent and the right seats with the right new skill sets and also to make this more of a tech driven culture.

You mentioned before that we sounded like a 40-year-old startup, right? In essence we are because we really, really put a lot of emphasis on how to attract tech talent and then what do tech and product folks want in an environment that's going to make them want to stay. As we talk about Weight Watchers being a little bit of an outdated brand or was at the time, I don't believe it is any longer, we had similar experience to the one I told you about my own introduction to the company with a lot of our tech folks. We'd reached out to them in various channels and through various sources and we would hear folks say, "Weight Watchers, really? Why would I work at Weight Watchers when I can go work at ... " name any of the big tech companies out there.

Jacob Morgan: Yeah, Uber, Google, Facebook.

Kimberly Samon: Exactly right, right. We knew though that if we could get these candidates to the door we would sell them and we do. We have a very, very high close ratio because folks were thinking about hey, yeah my mom did that or my grandma did that or my aunt did that from a consumer Weight Watchers perspective. They couldn't really envision themselves in that environment but then when they got here and they saw the environment they were like, "Wow this is so cool."

In the last couple of years we've done a lot to showcase the internal workings of Weight Watchers through various channels like the Muse and LinkedIn and

another sources in order for forks to kind of take a peak on the inside because when they were just thinking about the brand as they knew it, they didn't really see themselves particularly in our tech world of having a connection to it.

Then when we bring them to the office and they hear about our mission and they see the environment and they interact with colleagues they're pretty sold on the proposition. The tech transformation from me was such a big win. We're still going through it but we're on the downside of it and it's night and day compared to what it was when I got here. It really helped change the culture of the rest of the organization.

Jacob Morgan: I wanted to ask you about flexible work because I know this has been very much in the news lately and we didn't get a chance to touch on this for Weight Watchers. Do you guys enable any kind of flexible or remote work and what's your stance on that?

Kimberly Samon: Yeah, we sure do. I'm a huge proponent of flexible work and we have policies around flexible work. We leave it up to the manager to determine whether the person's role blends itself to flexible work. But in general, I would say as an organization, we're very, I want to say liberal but we're very good at letting folks have the flexibility when they needed provided that of course the job gets done and all the right connection points are happening among teams.

We do a lot of team-based work and sometimes it's important to be in the room and sometimes it's okay to be on the phone and as long as we know that things tends to work out well. We just did an employee engagement survey and that actually scored fairly high for us among our workforce that they did have the flexibility to integrate life and work and that is something that I believe in.

We also do things like summer Fridays. Between Memorial Day and Labor Day, we close 1:00 on Fridays and we let folks start their weekends early and we do it with the caveat of, pardon me, that you can be out of the office, you still to get your work done. But if you can get it done in less amount of time and have the luxury of kicking off on a Friday afternoon and starting your weekend, then that would be great.

Jacob Morgan: Yeah. I'm a big believer in the flexible and remote work aspects as well so I'm glad you support that too.

I have kind of a different question for you and it's all around leadership of the future. One of the things, and I don't know if you thought about this and all, but one of the things that companies seem to be concerned with is we seem in general kind of understand what leadership skills are required for now, for 2020 but what about for 2025?

Have you thought about what sort of leaders you want at Weight Watchers in 2025, like what skills might be relevant, what kind of people you want in those

roles or positions because it seems by then we're going to have a different type of workforce. We have AI stuff that we're talking about and automation. It seems like you need different skills to be able to manage and lead in the year 2025. I'm curious if you have any thoughts on that.

Kimberly Samon:

Yeah. I do have thoughts on that and we are having lot of these discussions now as we're looking at building a workforce of the future and I'm going to talk about leadership skills and technical skills a little bit differently and we've seen in the last decade every permutation of leadership skills what's working, what's not working, and I don't mean we at Weight Watchers I mean the HR community. I keep going back to the fundamentals of leadership really haven't change that much over the last 50 years and so things like communication and things like results orientation and things like alignment, those are always going to be foundational to a high performing organization.

How people achieve those things have changed over time. To our conversation earlier, perhaps it was okay in order to drive results to be more command and control. Now, folks really want to be attached to a purpose and make an impact and follow someone they trust and believe in. How leader show up? I believe will be different than how they've showed up in the past but I think the fundamentals of high performing organizations and leadership principles remain the same.

In terms of the skills we need to compete effectively, everything you said absolutely; data analytics, data scientists, machine learning, artificial intelligence, all of those things that a lot of companies are grappling with, we're doing the same here at Weight Watchers.

We sit on a tremendous amount of data that can be so powerful to our consumer particularly as we refine our approach on personalization. We have a saying here that consumers want us to we say show me that you know me. How do we take all of this data and really turn it into something that is personalized to the consumer, to our members? From my perspective, I'm thinking through the same on how do we do the same for our workforce?

Is there a world in the future where everyone doesn't have to have the exact same benefits or everyone doesn't have to have the exact same work schedule?

I don't know we haven't done a lot work on it but I do believe with the advent of all the data analytics we can craft some pretty specialized programs not only for consumers but for employees alike.

Jacob Morgan:

Are you paying attention to people analytics and data analytics inside of Weight Watchers when looking at your employees and how they work and what they work on stuff like that as well?

Kimberly Samon: I am and I would say we're just starting that journey. We have good course set of analytics I look at every month. But in terms of the fancy personalization, redesigning things, we're just getting started on that. That's not something that we're deep in yet.

Jacob Morgan: Right, I know many companies around the world are kind of just getting started on that process but it's good to hear it's something that you're thinking about and making investments. I think that's great.

Now, we talked a lot about ... well not a lot about but we talked on leadership skills of 2025 and what some of those might look like. What about just general employee skill sets that you look for. When you think about good employee for Weight Watchers or maybe even for another company, are there specific skill sets that you think employees need to possess today and going forward that maybe weren't as crucial or important over the past few decades?

Kimberly Samon: Yeah, absolutely. One thing that folks don't really associate us with is being a tech company and we consider ourselves the technology company more than half of our company in our corporate teams are engaged in app development and online services.

When I think about Weight Watchers in particular and then the employee population at large, that tech enablement piece is really important to us. When I first joined, I would say we probably weren't from an employee population as tech savvy as some of the other companies I've been at particularly for being a tech company.

We have put a lot of emphasis on that. We've made a great strides but I do think the technology component, however it is defined, needs to be part of a worker's toolkit no matter what. I don't mean technology component like a programmer. I mean someone sitting in HR has to be really comfortable with technology as we move towards things like self-service in some areas and report riding tools and things that perhaps weren't part of someone's everyday life in the past, video technology for communication. I think that is going to be a big piece of it.

I think the whole notion of agile and I don't mean agile just in tech development but I mean as a way of thinking is a really important skill set for a workforce. I think long gone are the days of five-year business plans and three-year development cycles and in a technology company particularly ones like ours, a technology company like ours, we have to be really mindful of the speed with which we've developed and how we develop in order to meet consumer demand and that thinking is starting to permeate the rest of the organization and I think that's going to be an even more important skill set, mindset even of a worker going forward.

I think the ability to collaborate is also really important that to me is foundational in Weight Watchers and I don't see that changing. We do a lot of cross functional teamwork. If we're developing a particular feature on the app, we might have folks from product tech, insights, marketing, training and development all sitting on a project team and collaborating and working together and having each other's back and meeting common goals and deadlines, I think that's going to continue to be something that we look for as an organization and in the employee population at large.

Jacob Morgan: Well, I know we've been chatting for a little while now and I was going to ask you some kind of a fun rapid fire questions. But before we get into those, is there anything else that you want listeners to know about some of the work that you guys been doing at Weight Watchers or any advice that you would like to give them around how to succeed in this changing world of work before we jump into some of the fun stuff.

Kimberly Samon: Yeah. In terms of the changing world of Weight Watchers, I would encourage any listener to go out and sample the brand. A lot of folks understand or understood the brand to be one thing and I think if they took another look at it would look completely differently than maybe their expectations. I would say absolutely try it.

In terms of the advice, I cannot stress enough the notion of being an authentic leader and I know I spend a bunch time on that earlier in our conversation but as people develop their self and their truth and who they are and why they show up every day, I really think people need, leaders need to spend time understanding themselves better in that regard and why they come to work every day and why they interact and how they are going to serve those around them. I would just encourage every leader to spend some time trying to answer those questions for themselves.

Jacob Morgan: Perfect. I think that's a great way to wrap up. All right. Now, just a couple fun rapid fire questions for you. Just so listeners can get to know you a little bit better. First one, is what's the most embarrassing moment you had at work?

Kimberly Samon: Oh gosh. I walked into a conference room after hours thinking no one was there and someone was there without their clothes on.

Jacob Morgan: Oh my God. All right that might be my favorite, I think out of the 160 plus interviews that I've done that might be my favorite one. We won't go into details about it.

Kimberly Samon: No, we won't.

Jacob Morgan: But that is a, that's a very good one. All right. If you were a superhero, who would you be?

Kimberly Samon: Oh, interesting. I don't know many superheroes. I'm going to have to say Wonder Woman.

Jacob Morgan: Wonder Women, all right, the Chief Learning Officer from SAP, Jenny Dearborn, that's her favorite one as well. A lot of Wonder Woman fans. What's a book that you recommend? It could be a business book or a nonbusiness book.

Kimberly Samon: There are two books that I would recommend. One is a business book and I love this book. It's a quick read. It's been out for years and years but it's called Leadership and Self Deception and it talks about the role of a leader and how leaders often dilute themselves into believing those around them serve their purpose, when the leader should be extending themselves to serve others and it's a very quick read but very impactful and really made an impact on me early on in my career when I read it.

Jacob Morgan: I'll check that one out. I haven't heard that one but it sounds something I'd definitely be interested in.

Kimberly Samon: The other one is ...

Jacob Morgan: Oh, I'm sorry I forgot you said you had two.

Kimberly Samon: Oh, no sorry. The other one is I love historical fiction and there is a book called New York by Edward Rutherfurd and it's a historical account of New York from the time the Native Americans were here until modern day and it's fascinating. I would highly recommend that. It is not a quick read it's about 800 pages but brilliantly done.

Jacob Morgan: Oh my goodness 800 pages, okay. If you are willing to brave 800 pages, I'd definitely check that one out. If you were doing a different career, what do you think you would have ended up doing and why?

Kimberly Samon: I don't think it would be one. I think it would be a bunch of different ones. I'm an amateur screen writer. I love to write screenplays and I write them and put them down and write them and put them down and I keep threatening one day I'm going to try to get one published. I like that creative process.

I also love to cook. As I've said in the past I think I would love, pardon me, to own a restaurant and have food and wine and community and people around all the time. I think that would be a really cool thing.

Jacob Morgan: Oh yeah that sounds like a lot of fun. If you could have dinner with anybody alive or dead, who would it be?

Kimberly Samon: These are really good questions, Jacob. Let's see. I have to say my Maya Angelou is up there.

Jacob Morgan: That's definitely somebody I'm sure a lot of people would love to have dinner with. That's a great one.

Kimberly Samon: Yeah.

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

Kimberly Samon: This is actually very timely. My husband and I always talk about, where we going to retire? I've been a lot of places in the world but I don't know if I've been to enough places to know where I want to retire yet. I don't think I figured that one out yet.

Jacob Morgan: All right. Where are you based now, by the way?

Kimberly Samon: New York.

Jacob Morgan: You're in New York, that's right. Well, New York is a lot of people love in New York. You're in a pretty good spot now.

Kimberly Samon: Oh I'm not complaining. It's fantastic. Fantastic.

Jacob Morgan: Last two questions for you, if you can get rid of one workplace practice, which one would it be?

Kimberly Samon: Performance reviews.

Jacob Morgan: Oh okay. I know a lot of companies that's been a very popular trend of getting rid of those. If you could implement one workplace practice, which one would you implement?

Kimberly Samon: I would replace performance reviews with some sort of listening and feedback forum. I haven't fully thought it through yet but I'm working on it.

Jacob Morgan: Yeah, that's very good. A lot of companies is I'm sure you know around the world have been exploring annual employee performance reviews and what they can do instead. You're right there with tons of other companies that are thinking about the exact same thing.

Well, I know we only have a couple minutes left so where can people go to learn more about you and some of the work that you're doing. I know you're in LinkedIn. I don't know if you're in Twitter or anywhere else but anything that you want to mention as far as yourself or Weight Watchers, please do so.

Kimberly Samon: Yeah, certainly LinkedIn. Our weightwatchers.com site, our career site, The Muse. Certainly our company over indexes in a good way on connectivity so reach out to folks in the company to our recruiters and they would be happy to talk to you about our amazing company.

Jacob Morgan: Perfect. Well, Kimberly I really, really appreciate your time. Any last parting words of wisdom you want to embark on the Future of Work Podcast listeners?

Kimberly Samon: What I would say is stay tuned. I think this company is going to do even more greater things and I hope everyone will stand and support and cheer us on.

Jacob Morgan: Hey, you at least have one cheerleader over here so I'm very much looking forward to seeing some of the cool stuff that you guys are working on. Kimberly, thank you so much for taking time out of your day.

Kimberly Samon: Thank you so Jacob I appreciate it.

Jacob Morgan: Thanks for everyone for tuning into this week episode of the podcast. My guest again has been Kimberly Samon, the Chief Human Resource Officer at Weight Watchers. I'll see all you guys next week.