

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 02:34

Hello, everyone. Welcome to another episode of the future of work with Jacob Morgan. My guest today is Laurent Therivel, the CEO of U.S. Cellular Laurent, thank you for joining me.

LT 02:47

Well, thanks, Jacob. It's good to be with you.

Jacob 02:49

So before we start talking about the work related stuff, I'm really curious just to hear your story. So background where and how you grew up? I mean, what was life like for you, before becoming CEO of US Cellular?

LT 03:06

Sure. So let's see. I'll start at the beginning. I'm a child of immigrants. So my father is from Italy. My mother's from Germany. I was born in the US, but we moved around a little bit when I was a kid. So I was born in New York. We moved to England for a couple years, and I was young and back to New York, but then then Texas when I was when I was in third grade.

LT 03:29

So I kind of grew up in Houston. I went to Texas A&M, got a kind of business degree there but also knew that I was going to be in the Marine Corps. So I joined the Marines coming out of coming out of Texas A&M. I was a communications officer. So I spent time working in radio networks and computer networks spent time in most of my time in Southeast Asia, so stationed in Okinawa, but Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, East Timor, Indonesia, and then I ended my career with the Marines in San Diego.

LT 04:01

I went to business school coming out of business school, I was a consultant for a couple years at Bain and Company in Dallas. I did a startup for for a couple years. So I was the COO of a voice over IP applications startup. And then I joined AT&T. And so I did 12 years with AT&T, different jobs at AT&T between mostly between strategy and running different parts of the business. My last job at AT&T was that I was CEO of AT&T, Mexico. So I spent a couple years in Mexico City. Absolutely loved our time in Mexico. And I took the job at US Cellular about six months ago. So my family and I have twin girls, they're 13. And so my family and I moved from Mexico City to Chicago in the middle of a pandemic, and here we are

Jacob 04:52

Pretty cool. Yeah, it's moving during a pandemic is not the easiest thing in the world to do. For sure.

LT 04:59

Well You're kind of lucky the, you know, the real estate market hasn't exactly been hurt too badly. So there's still people and in selling houses, but certainly driving across the country and stopping at gas stations was a whole different story than it used to be.

Jacob 05:12

Yeah, it's interesting also, that you come from a family of immigrants because my family, they came from the Republic of Georgia, they actually met in Italy. While they were emigrating out of the Republic of Georgia, I was born in Australia, and now we all live in the United States.

LT 05:27

Global Citizen.

Jacob 05:29

Yeah. So I'm curious. I mean, you clearly had the opportunity to live and work in different parts of the world. Do you think that has been important for you as a leader?

LT 05:41

I do. I think that working in different parts of the world, and, and also in different companies. You know, I mean, most of my most of my experience lately has been in telco. But certainly when I was in consulting, I worked in a variety of different industries, I think it gives you perspective.

LT 05:58

And it, it gives you the opportunity to, to think differently. You get it both working, but also living in different countries, I think gives you the ability to think differently, you see problems differently. And I think you can understand different people's needs. And I think a lot of times, you can maybe be a little bit more empathetic if you've had the chance to sort of walk in a bunch of different people's shoes.

Jacob 06:25

Well, I love that advice. And you mentioned global citizen, which is actually one of the literally one of the mindsets that I talk about in my book on leadership. And a lot of the CEOs I've had the opportunity to interview over the years always talk about how big of an impact that has had just surrounding themselves by people who are not like them. What about for people who don't have the opportunity to travel to different parts of the world, for example, it's even members of your team if they're trying to build that skill of empathy. I mean, any advice for future or would be leaders who want to build up that skill, but they don't have the like the travel opportunity?

LT 07:03

Certainly. So I think it comes back to this to the this question of diversity. And you know, there's a lot of studies that have demonstrated that diverse teams make better decisions. And I think our minds

immediately when we think about diversity, our minds immediately go to, you know, let's call it personal demographics that were that we've kind of pay attention to, and maybe businesses track, right. So men and women or people of color or in a sexual orientation. But diversity can mean a lot of other things. Right?

LT 07:35

Diversity can mean okay, well, have you had global experiences, diversity can also be a diversity of thought, right? So how is it that you think, how is it that you make decisions and extroverts versus introverts and I think even if you haven't had the opportunity to live in different countries or travel a lot, you still have the ability to make sure that if you're a leader, that you're populating your teams with people that have diversity of thought, and that think differently? And maybe we'll challenge each other and, and that doesn't require global citizens. I mean, ideally, you have those but you can you as long as you're promoting diversity across your teams, I think you end up making better decisions.

Jacob 08:20

Yeah, I couldn't agree more. I'm also curious, just more about you, and why were you able to grow and excel in your career? And this is a question I love to ask a lot of CEOs because as I always tell them, you know, you were surrounded by a lot of talented smart people throughout your career, people who are just as capable, but for some reason you became the CEO, you know, you were able to grow in your career where maybe other people got stuck in mid mid level leadership roles. Did you do anything differently? Do you possess some magical skill that other people don't have? or Why do you think you've been able to grow and excel?

LT 08:57

So there's probably a few things I would point at, but before I get to maybe things that I've done, I think it's important to highlight the importance of luck. You know, I think anybody who says, Oh, yes, I kind of laid out my path from birth to the C suite, and you know, executed perfectly every step along the way. There's a massive amount of luck that contributes to success.

LT 09:23

I was also lucky enough to be born to you know, to parents that invested in me and that cared about me and that spent time I have two older sisters that invested in me and spend time with me. And so yeah, there's probably a couple individual things and I'm happy to talk about those but having a healthy element of luck and having a healthy supportive family upfront and people who care about you, and that may not have anything to do with you specifically and it plays I think, a massive role in people's success.

LT 09:54

Now, that being said, if you a few things that I that I either either on purpose or inadvertently did, I think The first thing I would highlight is early in your career and early in my career, unless you know exactly what it is that you want to go do, right? So if you're Mark Zuckerberg, and you have this vision, and you kind of know exactly the platform that you want to create, fantastic, go do it. But if you don't, it's important earlier in your career to create option value.

LT 10:23

And so there's there's courses of study that create option value. And you never go wrong studying accounting, studying finance, in the English model, where instead of actually focusing on specific skills, they teach you how to learn in undergrad. So you know, a lot of people study mathematics, so let's study economics, taking courses and, and focusing on something from an educational perspective to create option values important. And then early on...

Jacob 10:59

So wait, when you say option now, you mean, something that allows you to apply what you've learned to different areas instead of just one specific niche?

LT 11:07

Absolutely. And when you ask the question, okay, what can I go do next from this job, that the universe expands, coming out of that job, rather than contracts over time in your career the universe of things you can go do next will get smaller, because by definition, you'll start to focus. But early in your career, right? If you decide that you're going to go join the military, or if you're going to go do consulting, those are things that expand the possible opportunities that you can go to next. And so that creates option value for you.

Jacob 11:44

I always like to think of it I did a video on this a little while ago, kind of thinking like a taste tester, you know, if you like going to a Baskin Robbins, and there's 31 flavors in there, you know, you're gonna ask to try some of them before you say that's the one that I want in on my cone or in my cup, like you try different things. And I think that's super important. So I love the way that you position it as option value. Because if unless, like you said, Unless you 100% know that you want to be a philosophy major, or you want to study like you know, medieval history, chances are being able to apply the things that you learn and experience to broader areas will will be much more useful for you earlier on in your career, couldn't agree more.

LT 12:26

And, and you know, Jacob, some people do. I mean, some people know exactly what they want to do. I didn't. And I would expect most people don't, and that's fine. You know, I think if you can go find that find things that create optionality for you, I think it's, I think it's good. And then I would say the other thing that I spend a lot of time on, and this is, and this has become more and more important later in my career is don't accept complexity. And let me explain what I mean by that.

LT 12:56

If you're not able to explain what it is either that you do is your job. Or that a function in a company does or what your business does. If you can't explain it fairly simply, you probably don't know your business well enough, or you're not necessarily comfortable with what you're doing. And I find a lot of people bathe in complexity, or they wallow in it, they love it. And the reason is, is it's defensive, right? Because if someone says, Hey, what is it that you do? And your answers are, it's really complicated? Well, it makes it seem powerful and important.

LT 13:33

But at the end of the day, it's a lot harder to get things done if you're constantly having to try to explain this incredibly complex job or this incredibly complex company. And usually, most good leaders, most good CEOs can explain what their company does, or can explain the way that they add value in very, very simple terms. And so trying to avoid complexity, and if I'm in a job, or I'm in a role, and I say, Man, this is really complicated. Well, then it's on me to go figure it out, and really get into the guts of it and figure out how to make it simple.

LT 14:04

And once I can explain it simply and once the actions are simple, and maybe the performance indicators are simple, well, then I kind of know I've cracked the code on that. So that avoiding complexity or avoiding wallowing in it is the second thing that I try hard to do.

Jacob 14:19

I want to talk a little bit about luck as well. So I interviewed the CEO of MetricStream a little while ago, Shellye Archambeau and she talked about this idea of luck is important, but she gave this phrase of like, create your own luck, meaning like, be prepared to take advantage of the opportunity when the opportunity arises. So you know, position yourself because I think that happens to everybody, right?

Jacob 14:42

Everyone at some point gets that like the phone call to step up with the opportunity to do something that they feel uncomfortable doing. And it's making sure that when that opportunity does come up, that you're, you're ready for it. But I'm curious to hear from your perspective, when you say luck, I mean Obviously, it wasn't complete luck, right? It's not like somebody flipped a coin and said, Well, we either want to have LT is the CEO or, you know, one of these 20 other people. And if the if the dice lands on LT, then we'll pick him. So what role did did luck play? Maybe you can elaborate a little bit on that?

LT 15:20

Sure. So yeah, when I was talking a lot earlier, I think there's an there's an element of luck in a lot of people's successes. You know, I go back to I mean, data shows, right, if you're lucky enough to be born to two parents that stick together. You have a better chance of being successful in the long term. Increasingly, and this is unfortunate, right, increasingly, the the best indicator of someone's future earnings is what do their parents earn, unfortunate. I mean, it's sad that that's the case. It shouldn't be the case. But so there is an element of luck into kind of how you're born, how you grow up.

Jacob 16:00

Yeah, we're born to the situation. Yeah. I totally agree.

LT 16:03

That that factors in No, I agree, though, with the point about, let's call it either making your own luck. I sometimes feel like that's a, that's a little bit of a way of saying, Well, yeah, I feel like I should say that walk played a role that really it was all me. But what's your previous guest said is absolutely right, which is you have to be ready to take advantage of opportunities when they arise.

LT 16:26

And so I'll give you a perfect example from my career. My girls are 13, they have moved eight times. So we have, they've lived in eight different houses. And that's hard. And I don't take for granted the challenges that puts on them and the challenges that it puts on my wife. I also think, by the way that in the long run, that will make them more flexible, that will make them more resilient. I think there's upsides to that. But each one of those moves that occurred was because an opportunity presented itself professionally.

LT 17:06

And I had upfront sat down and had the conversation with my wife very early on, hey, you know, at what point are we comfortable moving and what point aren't we. And we decided very early on that until our daughters were in high school, that we were going to be comfortable moving. And that once they were in high school, we were going to stay put. And my girls are going into high school next year. And I have a promise that I've made to them. And I don't care what opportunities present themselves, right, we're going to be in one place for them to go to high school, because I think that's important for them.

LT 17:39

Having that upfront conversation with my wife about, hey, if an opportunity presents itself, are we comfortable moving? Can we be geographically flexible. That's preparing yourself for the opportunity when it arises. And then when that lucky opportunity arises, when that lucky phone call comes, you can be in a position to say yes, and you don't have to sacrifice the personal side of your of your life. I find a lot of people haven't done that upfront, they haven't had those hard, upfront conversations. And so then when the opportunity arises, one of two things happen. They either say yes to a professional opportunity, but they haven't checked with their loved ones. And at some point, they pick their heads up and they don't know their wife anymore. And their kids don't know who they are. And they've grown apart from a personal perspective.

LT 18:30

Or the opportunity presents itself and they have to say no, because they haven't laid the groundwork on the personal side. And so I think there's an element that your previous guest talked about, which is preparing yourself for those lucky breaks.

Jacob 18:42

How do you pick the opportunity? Because I'm sure there have been plenty of opportunities during your career that you've had to say no to? And of course, plenty of opportunities you had to say yes to. So how do you know if an opportunity is good for you? If you're ready for it, if you should be taking it on? I mean, how do you make those decisions.

LT 19:02

So I think it helps to have a general vision about where you would like to go in your career. where you want your purse, your professional life to go. And by the way, I also think it helps to have a general vision for your personal life. What do I want for my family? What do I want for my husband? For my wife? What do I want for my kids? And I say general very specifically because you want to be heading

in a certain direction. And if opportunities present itself that don't move you in that direction, that's an opportunity you should say no to.

LT 19:38

But a lot of times opportunities present itself the move, you're directionally right, but not on that perfect linear course. And that's okay. So can you build in enough personal flexibility so that you can say yes, to those opportunities when they arise that new view generally in the direction you're trying to go?

LT 19:57

I'll give you an example. I was the CFO of our of the b2b group at AT&T, and anyone who knows me would say, Yeah, he can probably talk finance. And I'm not sure if he's really qualified to be a CFO. But it was a fantastic broadening opportunity for him. And it's not one that I would have selected for myself, it was one of those phone calls that kind of came out of the blue, hey, we'd like you to do this.

LT 20:23

And because I was able to look at it as an opportunity to broaden my skill set a little bit, it was a fantastic opportunity with fantastic people. Whereas if I had said, Oh, no, you know, I've got this very linear path, he's very specific things, these checkboxes I want to do with my career, I would have said no to that opportunity, and I wouldn't have gotten the learning that came along with it.

Jacob 20:44

Do you think these opportunities should scare you a little bit when they come around?

LT 20:47

Ideally, yes. You know, I think if you have, if you look at the next job, and you think to yourself, oh, yeah, I got that nailed. Well, then there's probably not going to be much personal learning. And quite frankly, we'll probably get bored. You know, you'll be six months, a year, two years in, and you'll and you'll quickly get bored. And that's not doing a service to the people that created the opportunity for you. And it's not created. It's not doing a service to your team, either.

Jacob 21:15

Yeah. Okay. Makes sense. So I wanted to give you kind of a few scenarios of different people in their careers, just just to see what advice you might have for them. The first one we kind of already touched on, and this is somebody pretty new in their career. They don't really know what they want to do. They there may be at a company and they're, you know, they're there. But they're not sure it's, it's for them.

Jacob 21:38

Have you ever had conversations with people like that? I'm sure you've had it at your companies for like, you know, LT I mean, I don't know, I don't know what I want to do. I don't know if this is the right place for me. How would you guide someone like that, to help them figure out, you know, path to go down?

LT 21:56

So I would give two specific pieces of advice, I think the first is, is that you have to be very careful to distinguish the difference between a company and a role, right, so a role at a company has a very specific set of particulars. You have a specific boss, you have a specific rhythm, you have a specific place where you work a specific output that's expected from you. And it can be you may be in one of those opportunities to say, you know, this just doesn't feel right.

LT 22:27

But then I think the question is, you have to go back, and you have to do the homework and you say, Well, what is it about this, that doesn't feel right? And a lot of times, maybe it's because you know, you don't have a great relationship with your boss, or maybe what you're being asked to do from an output perspective just doesn't match up to your skill set. And so if I think people are a little bit too quick to say, Oh, this company is not right, when maybe it's actually the role.

LT 22:56

And the second piece of advice I'd say, is to really do your homework on what your worth is, externally. I find a lot of people don't take the time to do that. And because of that, they either remain stuck, when they could be doing something much more exciting and much more interesting and a much better fit with their skills, but because they don't believe in themselves. And because they haven't taken the time to find their worth externally they you know, they don't take the leap.

LT 23:28

But I see just as much and maybe even more the situation, or people have convinced themselves, that they're incredibly valuable externally. But they haven't actually done the homework and so they show up every day, and they say I'm underpaid. And I could, you know, do I could have way more impact on the outside, when in reality, that may not necessarily be the case. And it can be very helpful to go do that homework. So you kind of know which camp you fall into.

Jacob 23:54

Okay. And by the way, if you think different scenarios make more sense than let me know, because you've probably talked to more people in this space. But the second scenario would be for more of like a mid level leader. And usually and correct me if I'm wrong, what I see from a lot of mid level leaders, the big issue that oftentimes they have is they say, Well, you know, I've been in this role for a while I'm not progressing. Like how do I go to the next step? Or they'll say something like, well, there's nothing left for me here. You know, I don't see any growth opportunities for me.

Jacob 24:25

So first, do you agree that that's a very common thing that mid level leaders struggle with? And if so, what advice would you have for somebody in that position?

LT 24:33

Absolutely. Jacob. I mean, I think that's a very common scenario. I think that the advice I usually give people there is you have to be willing to go develop your skill set laterally. Too often people say, Well, you know, I feel stuck, I feel stagnant. And then you say, Okay, well, you know, are you willing to move

You know, move geographically? No, no, no, I, if my family's here, you know, I can't move. Okay? Do you want to try a different a different role? Right? Do you want to move laterally in the organization and try and build your skill set somewhere else?

LT 25:12

Well, no, I don't really want to do that I think I'm good at accounting, or I'm good at logistics, or whatever it is, they're good at sales. Okay, so if that's the case, really, what you're doing is you're waiting for your boss to retire or die, right? If that doesn't happen, then you don't know where to go.

LT 25:28

And so I think you have to be willing to move laterally. And that can sometimes be in a different place in the organization. It can also be a different company. And the other thing, the other mistake, I think people make is, is they place limit personal limitations on themselves without actually having the conversations with their loved ones. I hear of nowhere near enough leaders actually having conversations with their husbands with their wives with their kids on, hey, what are we willing to do as a family. And understanding those parameters, so they can go make educated choices they assume.

LT 26:03

And a lot of times, those assumptions come back to bite them because they self limit, as opposed to their spouse or their kids or, or their boyfriend or their girlfriend limiting them, they limit themselves, and then they're not able to have the flexibility or take the big leap to make the next.

Jacob 26:27

The last scenario is more for senior level leaders. And for senior leaders, I've heard a couple different things. And you can let me know what you think is most common. I've heard from some senior level leaders, they eventually they get complacent or bored in their roles. I've heard from other senior level leaders who tell me that they just get burned out and they're doing too much. They're waking up at 4am, they never have time for themselves. People are pulling them apart in different directions. Like the balance is hard, right? I mean, family kids, like how do you do it all? So first, is that? Would you agree that that's a some of the some of the common challenges for senior leaders? And if so, what advice would you have for them?

LT 27:12

So I hate to be a broken record on it. But I think, again, the it goes back to the limitations that people place on themselves. And what I find a lot of times senior leaders do is they have financial expectations that don't necessarily match up to what they need, right? So there's a well, I could take a different job, or I could quit this and I could go become a professor, I could quit this and go be a bartender, which is my my love. And but I can't do that, right, because there's a certain quality of life that I hate or that my family has gotten used to.

LT 27:49

And if you don't back and, you know, revisit that question pretty regularly with your loved ones. Again, I think you make suboptimal decisions. And most people I found get themselves kind of wound up on the salary piece. When more than enough money in their careers to maintain to be happy. But maybe not

to maintain, you know, the exact same, you know, the same house, right? Or the same car. You got it. But how much does that stuff really matter at the end of the day? I'm not sure if it does.

LT 28:26

And so I find that a lot of times, people, senior leaders in their career aren't willing to really make the difficult move, because they've convinced themselves that they have a lot less flexibility, a lot less optionality than they really do. Which is sad, because if you think about all of the hard work that you've put in, it should be to go create optionality later in your life, right? You should have the ability to go teach classes or the mezcal importer, by the way, is what I want to do when I retire.

LT 28:59

So I think some of it has to do with, again, going back and having those conversations to make sure you know how much optionality that you really do have? Then it gets obviously to your personal appetite for risk. Right? So am I willing to go take a risk on a new career? Am I willing to take a risk on something on a new on a new avenue? I feel like often there's ways that you can start to dip your toe in opportunities without necessarily having to go Cannonball into the pool. And that needs to be much more manageable problem than that first issue, which is creating the optionality in the first place.

Jacob 29:36

Yeah, and I love that advice. And it almost seems like, the older you get, or the more senior you become, the more you start to become very obsessed with salary. And you know, younger in your career, it seems like you really care about opportunity, growth, development, learning and mentoring. And then the older you become, the more you get that stuff, the more you start thinking about how much money am I going to make how much money am I going to make? And I think you're right. It's, there's definitely this kind of blurring of work and life and a lot of people are realizing that there's more to a job and a career than just a paycheck.

Jacob 30:10

You know, there's a lot of other things that people care about and values. So it's, it's been fascinating to see that shift in that trend. I wanted to shift gears a little bit and talk, before we jump into some of the other things. How do you approach challenges or difficult choices? And I don't know, if you have any stories or examples that pop into mind? Do you have like, a mental model that you go through? Do you have people that you talk to? Or how do you think through something that's potentially difficult or challenging?

LT 30:40

So I think that it's a combination of analytics and advice. And, you know, the, the, my one of my favorite books, probably my favorite book is a book called Thinking Fast and Slow by Danny Kahneman. And, and, you know, what he talks about is, is how many wrong decisions that we make. Because we kind of, you know, go with our gut, or, you know, go with gut feeling.

LT 31:11

And so, a lot of times you can start to try to think analytically about decisions. And it the exercise, I think, as is as important as the analysis itself. So if you actually force yourself to take a step back and

say, How can I think about this complex issue that I have? How can I think about this problem that I have analytically whether the actual analysis guides you in one way or another is actually less important than trying to take that step back and try to be impartial and try and separate your emotions from a decision. almost by definition, a difficult decision will be emotional. And so trying to at least initially separate your emotions from that decision is step one.

LT 31:58

And then I think step two is having a healthy dose of humility. Everybody thinks that the problem that they're facing is unique and has never before occurred in this universe. And chances are, it's occurred hundreds of times. And so if you can develop a trusted set of friends, a trusted set of advisors, trusted set of mentors, that helps. And if nothing else, you know, there's one thing that people like talking more about than anything, and your podcast is kind of based on it, right, which is themselves. And so we find people that have faced a problem like this and just reach out to them and say, hey, how did you think through this, and I think having the humility to do that, is, is critical to making an informed decision.

LT 32:43

By the way, it also becomes harder and harder to later you get in your career, right? You're a CEO, and it's all you know, the bucks for me, and you know, I'd have to make all these decisions, it becomes harder and harder to take that step back and to say, you know, maybe I'm not actually the best person to make this decision. Maybe someone else can make this decision better than I can. But that takes a healthy amount of humility, something that we're pushing, by the way, in my company, so we're working very, very hard to decentralize decision making.

LT 33:13

Because the litmus test I try to put forward for my team is, I want to be involved in decisions if and only if I can add value to them. dollar value, the dollar figure that's associated with them doesn't matter can be a massive, massive financial decision. And I have an incredible CFO, I have an incredible head of strategy. And if they can make the decision and my input won't guide a better decision that I don't need to be involved. And that's a hard decision to make as a CEO.

Jacob 33:41

Yeah, for sure. How do you spend your day? What does a typical day look like for you?

LT 33:47

So pandemic or non pandemic?

Jacob 33:53

Yeah, maybe both?

LT 33:55

Yeah. Okay. So let me go with non pandemic, I, I generally try to spend a lot of time for my company in the field. And so you know, we're the, we're the fourth largest wireless provider in the country. We operate networks and distribution in 21 states. And so I would usually try to be spending a healthy amount of my time, either in stores, talking to customers, out with our network technicians, so that I can

kind of know what's going on with our network, or in our care centers, so that I can be listening in on what our customers have to tell us and how we're doing and serving.

LT 34:29

I think if you're not spending at least half of your time, staying close to the stakeholders that matter. You're not really doing your job as a CEO. And so I try to spend time with our customers. Another big stakeholder group for us is communities. So I try to be present and involved in communities as much as I can. A third one obviously is the investors. And so getting to you know, talk with our owners make sure I know their points of view answering questions for them. I spend a lot of time doing that.

LT 35:01

And then obviously, our employees. And so I spend a lot of time trying to be present for our employees. And so, pandemic now, right, so with COVID, much harder, obviously, to get out into our stores. And to get into our care centers, I still am able to talk to our investors a fair bit. But what I've tried to do, and I've been in the job for six months, and it's obviously a very strange situation, to take over a company in the middle of a pandemic, but I've really doubled down on being as present as I possibly can with our team.

LT 35:30

And so in a great deal of time on on teams calls, with people at every level of the organization to make sure that I'm listening that I know what's going on, and that I can do what I can to help them do their jobs better. You know, I have a pretty simple policy in terms of what a leader is there for, I think my job is to set a clear set of goals and priorities, to find fantastic people and put them in the right seats. And then to get obstacles out of their way. And so you know, that obstacles out of their way, I spend a lot of time now with a pandemic, listening to our employees and trying to make adjustments for them. So that when things clear up, I can be spending a lot of time in stores.

Jacob 36:16

Is there anything that you do on a regular basis, like, I don't know, a habit or ritual or a hack, if you want to call it something that you do on a regular basis that you think makes you a better leader or more effective or productive in any way?

LT 36:30

Well, I don't know if I necessarily have a leadership ritual that I could that I could be specific on. I mean, I do think I'll go back to that, to that point I made about about decision making, which is I do anytime there's a decision that comes to me, I try to ask myself, am I the person that's most qualified to make this decision? And usually, the answer to that question is no, I there's just there's someone in the organization that is more qualified than me to make the decision.

LT 37:01

And I do think that's a little bit unique. I mean, it's certainly not unique to me, but certainly in when people think about the role of a CEO, I think there's this image of, of someone that's just going from meeting to meeting and making decisions and making decisions and making decisions. And I ideally think that I should make 10 decisions a year. And yeah, I mean, I think those decisions should be

around talent and should be around portfolio. So what businesses should we be in? And what In my case, executive talent should we either be bringing in or exiting from the organization? And, and that's ideally where I should be spending my time and making decisions.

LT 37:46

Now, I mean, I'm probably over indexing a little bit, right, maybe it's more than 10. But most people, I think, would have an image that a CEO is making 10 decisions a day. And I think if that's the case, that's, you know, you're probably a little bit out of whack, and probably your team doesn't feel very empowered, either. And so that's maybe a little bit of a I don't know if I call it a hack, but it's certainly a question that I asked myself, anytime I'm in a meeting or any time a decision in front of me,

Jacob 38:14

Can you share a story of maybe a big mistake that you've made or a failure and how you dealt with it.

LT 38:23

Oh, absolutely. So I mentioned that I was at a startup for a little while. And I got brought into the startup, I was the COO. And I was brought in, because there there really wasn't a whole bunch of process in the company to actually run the business properly. It was a it was they've been around, I've started I've been around about six months, had a had a very strong technical leader, a CEO was kind of a sales guru. But there was no process and you know, no one really minding the business. And so I came in, and I kind of looked around, and it was a mess.

LT 39:00

I mean, we had CEOs wife was the head of HR, his best friend was the head of sales his brother in law was in charge of channels. We had five sales people, three of whom had never sold a thing. You know, we had to do it. It was it was a b2b company. And and you know, we had two salespeople carrying the whole thing.

LT 39:17

So I was there two weeks nights, blew it up. New org chart, new KPIs clear direction, everybody has a job fired the three salespeople that weren't producing hired new people, and kind of set the company on a certain course. And my deal that I had with the chairman, was that I had to get us cashflow positive, and I had a certain revenue target that I had to hit. You know, we operated the company for a little bit more than two years and we hit it. We hit the revenue target and we got to cashflow positive.

LT 39:48

And I had a whole bunch of shares that were gonna vest and I got called into this meeting with the CEO and the chairman and they said, Hey, you know, congratulations, you did what you said you were going to do, and now you're fired. And they fired me on the spot. Wow. And I was, I was flabbergasted, I was blown away by completely, I thought I was gonna get called in for champagne. And you know, and by the way, we're doubling your salary. And I got fired. And what I realized

Jacob 40:17

literally during that meeting, they just let you go like, right then in there,

LT 40:20

Right then and there. And what I realized was that everybody hated me. You know, it was my strategy, my org chart, my KPIs, my direction, my my my. And no, we know, our right, I had spent zero time getting buy in, and I had taken these leaders who probably were not in the right role. But they had left some other comfortable setup to come join this company. And some of it was on the promise of a vice president title or you're going to get to run this, you're going to get to run that. And I spent zero time getting buy in from the team on Hey, you know, should this be our strategy.

LT 41:09

And as I look back, you know, this specific moves in the specific direction we took the company, I feel very confident it was the right, they were the right moves, we did the right things. But I spent zero time getting buy in. And I was very, very lucky that I learned that lesson early. I think a lot of people, maybe they don't get that experience until late in their career, and then they can't recover from it. And I was lucky enough to learn it early. And so I've been able to apply it now and learn my lesson and do things a little bit differently.

LT 41:44

Now, I'd be lying. If if, you know, I came to that realization in the first 15 minutes right there probably with some tequila involved for a day or two. Yeah, no doubt, but the lesson learned of, of, hey, look, you have to build consensus, and people have to have buy in. And yes, people will follow a leader, but what they're really following is a vision that they feel like they can buy into and be part of. And I didn't do that. And that was a massive mistake. And I was just lucky enough to learn from it earlier.

Jacob 42:17

It's actually really, really interesting story. So it was interesting, because you did what you said you were gonna do the company became profitable, you you know, things were improving, you met your goals, and they still fire you. So if you had to redo that, I mean, what would you have done differently? Because it sounds like you made the right decisions. It's just kind of how you went about it is maybe what you would improve?

LT 42:39

I think it's quite it's, it's fairly simple, right? I mean, I think you you, you spend the first couple of weeks, couple of months, depending on the size of the company, and you ask a whole lot of questions. And then I think the second thing that you do is you, if you're going to make moves you you bring people along, right, so hey, what do you think about this? Right? What direction would you you know, would you go in this direction? You know, what do you think about this metric for success? What do you think about making this organizational move, and have people's voice be heard.

LT 43:14

Two things are going to happen? One, you're almost certainly going to make better decisions. Because many people's input is going to be better than one. And two, people will see their hand see their fingerprints in different elements of the path forward different elements of the strategy. And they'll say, Hey, I see that, you know, that component got taken in, right, my voice was heard. And there's buy in,

and you have to take what everyone sets, I mean, you're obviously going to get some conflicting input. And sometimes you just have to go and make the decision based on what you think is right.

LT 43:49

As long as people feel that their voices heard, and they see their fingerprints on the plan, right, then all of a sudden, it becomes our plan. And I mean, the third thing is very tactical, but you know, like the word, my and I from your vocabulary and go with our and we and things tend to flow a little bit easier.

Jacob 44:06

I love it. That's a super, I mean, that's a fantastic lesson learned. Because I think a lot of people make that mistake. And then they wonder why, you know, why did I get fired? Why am I not getting promoted? I, you know, I made the right decision. But it's because you didn't bring people along, you made the decision for other people, not with them. And then it's, you know, like you said, people didn't like you. And it's very hard to keep someone around, that people don't want to work with or for.

LT 44:34

It's hard to recover.

Jacob 44:35

Yeah, yeah, for sure. So again, I wanted to pivot a little bit and talk to you about what it was like to take over a company during a pandemic, because you're probably one of the few CEOs in the world who's actually became the CEO, right During the pandemic, like right smack in the middle, everything was going crazy. So can you talk a little bit about what that was like? I mean, and where were we in this pandemic, when got the call to be CEO where we was it just getting started, you already know what it was becoming.

LT 45:06

So I had the conversations I kind of had begun the conversations about the opportunity late in 2019. And so the conversations that started before we knew what was coming. However, right, I mean, I started in June of I mean, July 1 of 2020. So it was, you know, front end everywhere, right, and right in the middle of of it all. And so I certainly knew kind of what I was stepping into.

LT 45:34

Certainly you there have been some adjustments that I've had to make. Before I get into that, though, I will offer just a quick caveat, which is, you know, my in my industry, the telco industry has actually weathered the pandemic extremely well. I mean, in fact, I think we've distinguished ourselves during the pandemic. And I don't say that lightly. And it's not just my company. I mean, I'm extremely proud of what US Cellular has done in terms of both serving our customers, and also producing financial results delivering for our shareholders.

LT 46:12

But our industry as a whole, I think has done very, very well. And I'll just put a quick number behind it, but a little bit of context there. So in the in the third quarter of last year, when we're recording this, we

haven't reported fourth quarter results. So I'll just talk third quarter, year, over a year usage on our network was up over 70%. Right. So 70% increase in demand for the service that we provide.

LT 46:40

And there's a second thing that makes it complicated, which is, you know, we try to cover our customers everywhere they work, live and play. And if you think about those three words, and you think about how the pandemic affected that, you think about geographies where people work, dense downtown areas, we've seen a very, very low, very small increase in network demand, where people work and where people live and play, massive increases. And so it's not just an overall increase in our network. It's it's a kind of, also the the way that the network is organized and ology of it. And we've handled it really well. And my competitors have as well, right, so so I bring that up, only to say that, in some ways, it's been very difficult. And I'll talk a little bit about that challenge.

LT 47:29

But we've had the benefit that our our industry, and the demand for our product hasn't changed the way that it would be, for example, if I was taking over a hotel company, or if I was taking over an events company, or I was gonna go run a bar, totally. Now, a couple things are very challenging, which is the first and by far the most challenging is like, I can't get out to see customers. We have our highest share areas are in Wisconsin, in Iowa, Northern Illinois, those are areas where the pandemic has been hitting spent particularly hard lately. And so we have to be very cautious to be very careful, our stores are open, I try and duck in when I can. But by and large, the thing that's made it hard is that I haven't been able to be present the way that I would like, with customers.

LT 48:25

I have to rely on data and analytics to see kind of what our what our solutions, how our solutions are doing, as opposed to living them personally. And that part's been extremely challenging.

LT 48:37

There have however, been kind of silver linings, which is that because of technology. And this, by the way, I think is going to be a fundamental shift in the way that we work is the way that technology has enabled us to work during the pandemic. I think it's taken trends that would have taken 10 years and it's accelerated them in a matter of two months. That is my ability to reach out and be present for my team and be available and answer questions and have conversations. Ironically, I'm actually able to be more efficient, because if you think about it pre pandemic, what would the expectation event? Well, the expectation is, is that I have to get on a plane and I have to go visit all of our different regions, and maybe we have town halls and those town halls are in person. You know, that's the way that I get to know the team.

LT 49:32

That's the traditional way a CEO and my business would get out there and meet people. Why can't do that. So now what I'm doing instead is we do I I do tons of we use Microsoft Teams, but you can use teams, you can use zoom, whatever your collaboration, software choices, and I'm able to be present with my team in a much more efficient way. Much smaller groups, much more conducive to q&a

LT 49:59

And Technology has enabled me to be present for my team in a different way in the pandemic, and in a way might even be more effective than it would have been had we not been going through this.

Jacob 50:12

How many employees do you guys have, by the way?

LT 50:15

So we have about 5000 employees.

Jacob 50:16

5000. Okay. Yeah, I mean, it's definitely not a tiny organization to be present in front of all those people. So it sounds like technology for you guys has had a very positive effect in terms of leadership, communication, collaboration, staying present. So you haven't seen many negatives?

LT 50:36

I haven't. But I think that it's something that we have to we have to be on the lookout for. And so let me kind of explain what I mean, here. I think that if you think about it, it really defined, it really depends how you define work, and how you define time in the office.

LT 50:54

So if I define my time in the office, as if I define my work as a series of meetings, technology has helped me in measurably in managing meetings, being able to kind of get through the day, being able to share information, share data, share analytics, make informed decisions, it's what we've realized is that we do not need to be in the office to run this business. I don't think we knew that before that. I think a lot of companies didn't know that before the pandemic.

LT 51:30

I'll give you another good example, which is our care associates. So for the longest time, we have a fairly traditional care model, big building rows and rows of desks, people drive in and they take their customer calls there. And the reason we did that is because Oh, we've got to be compliant. And we take credit card information and clean desk policy, we couldn't possibly do that at home. Well, you know, and pandemic rolls around, and in three weeks, all of a sudden, you have to have everybody working from home, and you make it work.

LT 51:57

And what we realized is that our team can perform fantastically working from home. And the customers actually are quite patient with barking dogs in the background or the occasional crying child. And because of that, we can create great opportunities for our team. And we can be flexible in a way that helps them balance their personal lives, we get better talent, and on and on.

LT 52:19

There's a problem, though, which is that that's not just what work is about. And that's not just what the office is about. The office is also about building and reinforcing culture, and creating team cohesion.

And the, you know, the innocent meetings at the watercooler and the Hey, how's your how's your husband doing and hey how are the kids. And it is very difficult for technology right now to replace that element of office and of work and of the culture.

LT 52:56

And one of the things concerned about is that a lot of businesses are going to look at their level of success that they've had during the pandemic in terms of managing business managing work effectively, remotely, and they're gonna say, well, we don't need to get back together. And then six months, a year, two years down the path, they're gonna pick their heads up, and they're gonna say, Hey, wait a minute, what happened to our culture? What happened to our cohesion? And it's because there is still at times and getting together in person, and that's going to be tough.

Jacob 53:22

I couldn't agree more. I mean, the trust, the psychological safety, the relationships, you know, even things like loneliness, as much as it's, you know, for me, yeah, it's, and I used to travel, speak at 40-50 events a year. Now, I can do three events, in my sweatpants, you know, virtual virtual keynotes with a camp, you know, just put on a nice shirt. But you don't you don't have the same relationships with people. It's, it's very, it's very, very different.

Jacob 53:50

And I think you're right, there's something to be said, for the in person interactions. And I mean, at least what I hope will happen is we'll just have more flexible work environments, I think it would definitely be a shame. If organizations around the world just said, Oh, yeah, we don't need to see each other ever again, like everybody worked from home for the rest of your life. I think instead of what would be far more valuable is to say, we're just going to be more flexible with our options. You know, maybe you don't need to come in every day. Maybe you don't need to work nine to five, but there's still value in in seeing each other and building that relationship. So how are you thinking about that for for your team, your company?

LT 54:26

Yeah, I think you hit the nail on the head. The analogy that I would draw is it's particularly close to home because of my daughter's but you know, on one hand, teenagers, this is pre pandemic, right? teenagers have never been more connected. Social networking, right. And they can always be connected to their friends and their passions and things that are interesting to them. And they have this amazing connected lifestyle. Yet at the same time, teens say they've never been lonelier.

Jacob 54:57

It's crazy

LT 54:59

But it is It makes sense. If you think about Well, that's true, because on one hand, you are very connected. But on the other hand that that connection is curated, right, it isn't the raw reality that you get when you're in person. And it isn't a spontaneous. And so I think the way that we're going to be

handling it is exactly the way you described, which is we're going to be going back to some kind of what I would call a matrix work environment.

LT 55:22

And so we were traditionally very much a butts in seats kind of company, we will be relaxing that. And so one of the things that I've asked every one of our leaders to do, and this may be useful for your listeners is, we're trying to think about defining a load factor for every role. And so what we're doing is we're going through each job in the company, and we're saying, hey, out of the month, how many days in the month does this job need to be in person. And the only parameters that I've put down are that it can't be zero, and it can't be 100.

LT 55:57

So if it's, if it's zero, then you're not meaning they don't have to be in the office any days in the month, then you're not creating those team building that cohesion, that cultural opportunity. If it's 100, then you've learned nothing from the pandemic, in terms of individually more efficient. And what we're finding in general, I mean, we still have to work through all the numbers, but on average, we're kind of coming back at about 40% average for our company is people say, Hey, you know, I feel like they need we need to be in the office 40% of the time per month, obviously a lot of variability role, my role, but that our leaders feel is giving them enough time to build cohesion, culture training, kind of get together, while still demonstrating to our employees that we've learned from this and that we can help you live your life better and more richly, you know, you can skip to commute a couple days a week, you can, you know, manage your time a little bit more efficiently. So that's kind of where we're landing on it.

Jacob 56:55

Okay, perfect. Makes sense? Why don't we just have a couple of minutes left. So I wanted to ask maybe one or two questions to see if you have any stories about this? Do you have any stories from your career of working for a leader that was terrible? So somebody who didn't treat you? Well, maybe somebody I don't know, who's taking credit for your work putting you'd like they were just not a good leader? And how you dealt with that and what you did?

LT 57:21

So I don't and and I, sorry, it's a bit probably a bit disappointing. But I've I've had the benefit of working with leaders that range from decent to fantastic. And I, but I would answer your question a tiny bit differently. Because, you know, there's a separate question that people ask me sometimes, which is, you know, what, who's your role model, what's the best one leader you've worked for, and so on. And I don't have a good answer to that either.

LT 57:52

And the reason is, is because what I've tried to do along the way, is to find both the good and the bad in every leader that I work for. And try to make sure that as best I can, that I emulate the good and avoid the bad and what I do personally, and I've, I've worked for people that are just incredibly inspirational, wonderful speakers, you know, you leave their office, and you just you feel so pumped up. But at the end of the day, you know, they're probably a little light on the analytics, and they probably are making decisions with their gut a little bit too much.

LT 58:33

On the flip side, I've worked with for, you know, real analytical hard asses, and a lot to learn. They're from the level of rigor and precision that they bring to decision making. But then you can also say, you know, I probably can introduce a little bit more empathy, a little bit more humility, a little bit more love into the, into the workplace. And so, I wish I had a more I wish I had a more fulsome answer for you. But I, but I guess I try to take, take, take both the good and the bad for every leader I work for.

Jacob 59:03

No, that's great. I think that's fantastic. Advice for a lot of people is to be able to look like you said, for the good and the bad and to kind of shape the kind of leader that the you want to become. And maybe last question for us around the the best leadership advice or business or career advice, either that you've been given, or that you would like to give people who are listening to this.

LT 59:30

So I mean, in terms of in terms of career advice, I think we've we've, we've talked a little bit about it, which is kind of going back to two fundamental things I don't think people do enough of the first is around optionality, right, creating optionality. But the second I really want to emphasize this has that optionality and the plan that you put in place, you have to get it nailed down in your personal life as well.

LT 59:55

What I found is that a lot of leaders spend a ton of time Laying out plans and having a very detailed plan for their professional life and you say, hey, what you know, what's your what's your professional plan, and they can go through 30, 60, 90 day and three, five years and all what it is that they're using and what they have pasted on their mirror and everything else. And then you say, what about your personal life, and they just kind of staring. And if your personal life if your family isn't in sync with what you're trying to accomplish professionally, inevitably, at some point, you grow apart.

LT 1:00:30

And, and that I've seen more executives fail because they, they haven't paid attention to that side of it. They haven't done the same level of planning the same level of rigor, the same way of bringing people along for the ride on the personal side as they have to professional. That's probably the place I wish people would spend more time and effort and energy makes them better professionally. And it certainly makes them happier.

Jacob 1:00:55

I love it. I think that's a wonderful, wonderful advice. Well, where can people go to learn more about you or US Cellular? Anything that you want to mention for people to check out or look at before we wrap up?

LT 1:01:09

Yeah, absolutely. So as I mentioned before, we're the fourth largest wireless player in the country, USCellular.com. We've recently won the JD Power award. So we actually have the best network in the

states that we operate in. And so we we operate in 21 states, I won't go through them all on your podcast. But if you can reach us, and you can have access to our network, we think we can provide some fantastic service for you. And we'd love to do it. So check us out. We'd love to have you part of the US Cellular family.

Jacob 1:01:39

Awesome. Thank you so much for taking time out of your day. I really really love your both your personal advice, your professional advice, your stories. I mean, it's really fantastic. So thank you for, for sharing with us.

LT 1:01:52

Well, thank you for having me. It was a great opportunity.