

BEHIND THE TALENT From Indeed

David: Welcome to Behind The Talent, a podcast from Indeed where we sit down with the people who find the people that drive industries, entertainment and culture. We'll hear how they do it and expand our understanding of what it means to be a recruiter in today's world of work.

Music up full... then under...

David: I'm David Mead. On today's show, a true superstar of talent recruiting and self-described people geek, Nicole Davidson. Nicole spent almost 10 years in human resources for some exciting ventures — everything from staffing a social media startup to hiring rocket scientists literally for a satellite imaging company. Then she founded Beacon HR to provide recruitment and retention strategies for other companies.

I begin the conversation by asking what is a synthetic aperture radar scientist for the international space station. And did you really fill that job?

Nicole: [laughs] We did, yeah, so it's this incredibly specialized ... like we were literally recruiting the world's best scientists in that particular skill set. And in synthetic aperture radar there were like eight people in the world that we were going after. So it was really fascinating, really challenging, that company that I worked with, it was so cool. They had cameras on the international space station. The industry was earth observation.

David: So for something like that, what was your strategy in hiring, like, literally rocket scientists? Like what, what was the strategy behind that?

Nicole: Both outbound and inbound. And when I say outbound, I mean actively sourcing what some people call head hunting. And then the inbound side is trying to build this little Vancouver based startup's employer brand so that they're well known within that international community. And someone who's maybe been at a huge space science organization would be interested in jumping ship and coming to work for the little guy and being part of something that's earlier stage and getting that off the ground.

We were looking for PhDs in a particular area. We would look up things that they've published, try to generate lists. We relied heavily on some of the existing employees who were out going to these international conferences on setting them up for success so that they knew how to wear their recruiter hat as well.

David: Tell me a little bit more about what would motivate such brilliant people to make a shift from one thing to another one career path over another?

Nicole: In my mind, I think a lot about impact and the ability to make impact and see your impact on lives, on the company, on what you're building. I also think not being a number, not being one out of a hundred people on a particular team, you get to be the person on that team. You get, you know, on a smaller team you sometimes get way more autonomy, way more responsibility. And there can be a financial upside as well if you're willing, if you're able to take a risk. A lot of those earlier stage companies are offering equity in some form, whether it's stock options or something else.

Maybe they've been at that bigger company for five plus years. People get really excited to be part of somebody else's origin story and to be the ones who are on the ground floor building something special.

David: When you were hiring for a social media startup, what got people excited about joining the team?

Nicole: That was really a company that understood the importance of a strong culture and hiring for, I like to say culture add, not just culture fit, because of course we don't want a homogenous company culture. You want diversity of worldview and different perspectives. Great people are gonna hire other great people. Early stage companies are looking for people who are grittier, who are more adaptable, who are more resilient.

And I think communication is even more important in an earlier stage company because the pace at which communication flows is incredible, and it's getting faster and faster as we're using all our different tools. We're seeing more companies set up for remote work. So communication in those softer skills. I'd say those are some really important pieces of what to look for in hiring if you're an early stage company and if you're about to go into hypergrowth,

David: Hmm. Really interesting. I love this idea about culture add and hiring for culture add rather than for culture fit.

Nicole: I definitely didn't come up with that. But whoever did is genius. I love it.

David: [laughs]

Nicole: A couple years ago we started talking about D&I, diversity and inclusion. We've added a B. We've added diversity, inclusion and belonging. So the focus now is not on culture fit. We don't want a homogenous culture, which is hard because when you're recruiting for a company, how many times do we go in and the hiring manager or the CEO or the leadership says, "This person on my team is it, I want you to carbon copy them exactly." [laughs] You know, they want a copy who's been really successful in the role.

David: Sure.

Nicole: Which is great to some extent, but when we talk about culture add, we're thinking about who's going to add to the work environment in a positive way. Who's going to bring a diversity of worldview, a diversity of opinion? We want to challenge the status quo and not just have a bunch of people who come from the exact same background, exact same upbringing and who aren't going to challenge us to get better and better every day.

David: That's really cool. What is it that inspired you to get into this industry and maybe more specifically, to start your own company?

Nicole: Right out of school, I went into a sales job. I then worked for the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympic Games, worked for 31 days straight. They paid me five grand. I was in my early 20s, so I took off, went traveling around the world for three and a half months, India, China, Thailand, Malaysia, Bali, all these really cool places. And I came back and sat down with a career guide book and pulled out the skills that I really enjoyed using and the ones that I was good at. And then I went out and did a whole bunch of informational interviews and learned about this cool thing called staffing. And I thought, "Oh, this is great. I get to communicate with people in person, in small groups and one-on-one, and I get to coach people. I get to help them connect with great companies and help them in something that impacts their lives."

So jumped in headfirst to staffing. And as my career progressed through staffing to in-house recruiting to HR, I realized that there's just this huge gap in the market. There's an opportunity to do it better. And I thought, "Oh my gosh, I'm going to do this better. I'm going to have more fun doing it, and I want to have a team of experts and I want us to all have that little bit more autonomy, flexibility, work, life integration while we get to do the work we love with growing companies." So I couldn't stop thinking about it. I was dreaming literally every night before bed thinking about how we were going to be different, what kind of look and feel we were gonna have, what our approach would be.

So finally I started as a side hustle, and then I went down to three days a week where I was working. The company was amazing, let me keep my steady paycheck and my benefits for six months while I had two clients on the side. And then it's been, since then, two years of pedal to the floor full time we're a team of six. And I've never looked back, almost never.

David: You've described yourself as a people geek, and I love that.

Nicole: [laughs]

David: In my work over the last decade or so, I've seen a huge shift where organizations are really realizing more and more that their business is actually people rather than the product or the service that they sell. Is that what you mean by people geek?

Nicole: I lovingly borrowed that from a company I really liked. If you're in HR and recruiting in 2020 and beyond, we have to be people geeks. I really encourage my team to embrace the

people geek mindset. One of our values is “get better every day.” You're seeking out opportunities for learning, whether that's around employer branding, also known as recruitment marketing, talent acquisition and recruiting or HR. We get to geek out on these things so that we can then talk about them as a team and bring them into the partners, the clients that we work with.

David: Do you have any stories that you can share about what being such a people geek has changed in your everyday life?

Nicole: Yeah, in our employer branding practice, it's a really exciting space because I don't know that there are any employer branding experts as of today. There's this sort of sense that we're all in it together and we're all learning and we're defining the practice as we go. Uh, so being a people geek. Great example is, someone on the team found this great article of the top 10, or 10 of the best job ads that are out there, that are on the internet right now. One of them was showcasing your employees. It was a picture of the employee. They are using this specifically for social. The caption was an employee testimonial and “We're hiring.” Loved that. So it's about let's not use a stock image, let's make it really, really human.

And that's something that ... literally just this morning we were talking about a recruitment marketing audit for a client and how we're going to amplify their job opportunities and we're going to implement that idea. We're all about testing and measuring ROI as well. And we encourage everyone we work with to do the same. With the newness that comes with employer branding, for example, everything needs to be tested and ROI needs to be measured, especially if you're putting budget behind it.

David: Do you find that most organizations, when it comes to recruiting and hiring, are not tracking that ROI or not being smart with the spend that they're making in that area?

Nicole: Yeah, and I don't know how that happened because any other department within an organization wouldn't be able to get away with not tracking ROI and not measuring success. I'm seeing a lot of leadership within the space where everyone's saying, “Okay, let's get, of course the data.” Everyone is really into the data and the analytics now, but “Let's get really granular and measure our spend and measure our source where people are coming from. Let's experiment and really push the envelope.” But always bringing that back to the business's objectives and making sure that it's aligned to the business's goals and strategy.

David: How do you know if your organization is getting to be known as a great place to work?

Nicole: With employer branding, we're still trying to figure out what those metrics are. For me, it's really the quality of applicants. I sometimes like to look at volume because that maybe means that you're getting more attention, your brand awareness or your employer brand awareness has gone up in the communities where you're hiring.

If it's fewer applicants that's fine, but I want them to be more high quality applicants so that you're spending less time reviewing resumes and more time having meaningful conversations with great candidates that could potentially convert to being your next great team member.

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David: Let's talk about job ads. I see some that, I mean, I hate to say it, but make the position sound really boring. How do you write a good one?

Nicole: Break out of the cliches. Be authentic. It's funny because if I think about job ads as an employer branding tool, I wonder when we got into the habit of writing it all out as a laundry list, like "This is what you, fantastic candidate who's got ten other options of great places to go. This is what you are going to do for us."

Instead of that laundry list, position it as you want to answer that "why," that "What's in it for me?" question. So think about the impact that they could have at your company. And then use your job ad as an opportunity to inject some personality. If your company has some personality, put it in your job ad, get creative with your copy. Maybe it's a visual job ad. Maybe it's not just putting it in one place, but maybe you have a social strategy so that you're getting more, more lift, more eyeballs on it. So the job ad is a really, really great tool and a good place to start with employer branding. We're always asking what is it that differentiates you from everybody else?

What is it that someone who comes to work at your company is going to get out of that, that's going to be different from everywhere else? That could be learning and development opportunities. That could be something quirky about your culture. Maybe you're a super diverse and inclusive workplace. Maybe that's a real differentiator wherever you're located in the world. So really thinking about those unique things then building stories around that and using stories of your team, of your employees. If they're comfortable sharing and shining a really bright spotlight on those.

David: How can a company make their job ad feel authentic?

Nicole: First step, get rid of jargon, get rid of buzzwords. Think about what's overused.

David: For example?

Nicole: "You're disrupting the industry..." Well are you really disrupting? Maybe talk about how you're doing it instead or maybe talk about why that's really exciting for your team members. Why they love being a part of that. Why you're on the bleeding edge or doing something different or taking a different approach or different mindset.

A really easy way to be authentic is to share real stories. Maybe this would be so cool, when you're putting together your job ad you interview the most successful person who's in that role at your company already and get some insight from them and put that on the job ad.

David: Do you have any specific examples of a great job ad that you've seen?

Nicole: Great job ads pop up on my radar every once in a while and I have a read through and I, I think it's lovely. It's creative. They've obviously put some effort into making it a little bit different from the rest. What really excites me these days is really beautiful well thought-out Careers pages or areas that you can have your talent community come to and read through and get engaged and get excited.

There's a leading company in the hospitality space that does a really good job at showcasing their employees. They showcase destinations, they're a hotel brand. So they talk about travel. And that's going to be really exciting for people in the hospitality industry who love to travel. So they're trying to pull at your heartstrings. It's still a job ad they're still going to funnel you into their Careers page, but they're doing it in a little bit of a different way.

David: So if you had to give us sort of the, the top three to five things that you think are most effective to have in a great job ad or on a careers page or a combination of both, what would that list look like?

Nicole: That would be the jobs themselves. So some details of what they're actually going to be doing day to day. Uh, the details of the company, culture values. You want to give people a chance to either opt in or opt out. So be as transparent as you possibly can about who's going to be a success, who will be a good fit or a good culture add at your company.

And then I love — these aren't necessarily must haves — but I love a blog, like another opportunity, another place to share stories of people who are successful there. Or maybe it's something to do with the industry. Something that's a little extra step to further engage candidates. It's nice to have an overview of the compensation package, especially if you're, let's say you're hiring a salesperson, they are driven by compensation. So that would be important to have on there. Maybe you have details on um, comp benefits and other perks.

David: How important is it for an organization to say something about its own values or its own mission or purpose?

Nicole: I think it's really, really important. I don't know that without that in a couple of years from now, you're going to be able to successfully attract great talent.

David: That's really interesting to see how the tide is sort of shifted away from just the mechanics of "This is the job and, you know, if you can fog a mirror and have the skills, that'll work," to "We've got to be more human about the way that we do business."

Nicole: We have to be more human and we have to be more aware that the market has changed. It's still a tight labor market. Great people have lots of options. So more than ever it's, I like to talk about it in that dating courtship. You have to make this a compelling and engaging experience for every single person who lands on your site, on your Careers page, talking to one of your recruiters or anyone on your team. You've got to make it memorable and you've got to give them that really positive VIP candidate experience.

David: Nicole, I love this idea of sort of seeing it as dating and courtship. What's your view on hiring slowly? What I mean by that is rather than just having a course of, you know, three interviews, you know, one over the phone, a couple in person, whatever it is, you actually might bring the person into a team meeting or to a company function just to see how they sort of fit and what they can add to use some of your other terminology.

Nicole: I like that, but I want to do it quickly so I don't know what we call that. Do we hire slowly, fast?

David: [laughs] Hire slowly, efficiently.

Nicole: [laughs] Yeah, exactly. I love the idea of doing your due diligence and really getting to know the person at the same time. You have to be mindful of the market we're in and that person could easily get three offers between the time that you have them come to your strategy "sesh" and the last interview. So it's important to keep the communication with them high touch, keep them engaged, keep them warm throughout the whole process.

[music]

Nicole: And if you can condense that whole process into a shorter amount of time, you'll have potentially more success when you get to the offer stage.

David: I think you've been in this industry for about 10 years now. What have you seen have been the major shifts in thinking around HR and recruiting?

Nicole: The biggest one in HR specifically is the shift from where HR was known as the personnel department and administrative and maybe had a negative reputation for the department that would slow things down and put up obstacles. Great HR is a strategic advantage for a company. They are the department that will help accelerate the company, and companies really they're acknowledging, they really get now that people is the number one competitive advantage. So they're starting to geek out on things like retention and engagement

and employee happiness, and they are paying attention to things like the cost to hire, and they really want to keep their team happy, engaged and productive.

David: It's interesting to see how you, how you see that shifting. So another interesting shift is this idea of, of sort of outsourced HR, of, of bringing people in rather than having an in house HR department. Is that going to become more of a trend in the future?

Nicole: I think so. Everyone's talking about the gig economy and more and more people are deciding that they want to do the work they love, but they want to have a little bit more autonomy or a little bit more flexibility in their lives, which means that we're getting this whole workforce of people who are really, really good at what they do, but they don't fit into that Monday to Friday, 9 to 5 box.

David: My mind immediately turns to those who are working from home. What are your thoughts around remote working?

Nicole: I have mixed thoughts around remote work. I've gone from one side of the spectrum, to "Yes, remote work. It's the future. Everyone needs to do it. We can't hire enough great people. So let's open our minds to the possibility of remote work," to trying it out with my team and realizing that you really cannot replace that face time. And communication and collaboration just works so much better in person and it's so much more efficient in person. And I think at times it can be more fun too which, who doesn't want to have fun in the workplace?

David: Yeah, of course.

Nicole: So now I've kinda, I've swung back to this medium where I want companies to be open to the idea, but there has to be some thought behind it. You can't just say, yeah, we're going to be a remote work environment and we're going to be successful.

David: Yeah, I've been working remotely for the last 10 years or so and you know, I was on a team where we were spread out all over the world, and every Monday we would have a huddle. And the rule was you couldn't talk business. It was all about sort of ... How am I feeling? How am I doing, where am I at? And it was really just more personally focused.

Nicole: I think that's really important because that's one of the things that you miss as a remote team is the water cooler talk and the opportunities to grab a beer after work or grab a coffee or connect on a more personal level.

David: Sure.

Nicole: So I think that's really smart. Any company who is set up to work remotely, you almost have to artificially create opportunities for water cooler talk.

David: The important thing that I picked up in working in a situation like that is whenever possible make it as human as possible. Which means if you have the option to do a video call, do video.

Nicole: Yes.

David: Rather than text or phone.

Nicole: That was a mistake we learned early on, we were relying way too heavily on our internal messaging tools because it was so quick. It was fun to use. We thought we were being really productive, but it became a bit of a distraction, and we realized that our communication quality wasn't there. We forgot about picking up the phone and calling each other. And we realize that the video calls are not necessarily in person face to face, but it's a pretty close second. So now we have video calls as the default, and if you can't do video calls then we'll look to everything else.

David: I'm really curious what you suggest to the companies that you work with to help remote employees feel like they're part of the tribe.

Nicole: Over communicate.

David: [laughs]

Nicole: Definitely over communicate.

Nicole: Make sure your team has the tools they need to over communicate. Whether that's the internal messaging, whether that if you're recruiting, if it's a great applicant tracking system or making sure that you've got a process around how you're communicating with each other so that candidate information isn't getting dropped. But over communication by far is the biggest pain point I see with remote teams not working.

David: That's great advice. You know, as I've traveled around over the last few years, I have seen some pretty incredible office spaces. Like, we've got kombucha bars and nap rooms and gyms and — I know that a lot of those things are a draw to people, but how much do you feel like those things lead to real engagement and real loyalty rather than just like, "Ooh, that's a nice to have, but you know, if I'm not getting paid enough, I can go get that somewhere else."

Nicole: I'd love to see the data, but my gut tells me that these are short term perks that are really exciting and really great for the first few months. But then once you've been there, what's left is the work you're doing, the team you're with, the impact you're making, the purpose or the mission of the company, the values that are either being lived or not being lived day to day. So it's been really interesting to see this rise of really cool, really trendy workspaces with a million

perks, ping pong tables and full meals on the company and all these really fun things. I don't think that that's what truly drives people's motivations. I don't think that's really long-term what people want, even though I think it's really strategic for talent acquisition and certainly can contribute to some extent to employee happiness and engagement, to some extent.

David: It's not that those things are bad, it's just that they may be incomplete. They're only half of the equation.

Nicole: Exactly.

David: What trends are you seeing in HR that extend to other areas of business as well?

Nicole: I'm really seeing companies wanting access to expert level, senior level talent, but not having the budget to pay for it. And maybe not having the full time head count, the full time job to require that full time person. I think what we'll continue to see is companies being more open to hiring independent consultants and contractors, hiring freelancers, being more open-minded to remote workers. And something cool I'm seeing is the idea of a fractional person. So maybe they come in, whether it's a fractional COO or a fractional CFO or fractional HR. That ability to hire an expert, but only for 25 hours a week.

David: I look at executives in most organizations, and they are up to their eyeballs in work, have so much to do, are so behind on so many things. How does that work if you're only in there 25 hours a week, how are you getting everything done that you need to get done?

Nicole: We get it done.

David: [laughs]

Nicole: We do great work and we just get it done. We're super efficient. We only hire really, really excellent people.

David: I love that. In a lot of the work that I've done, I see very different types of leaders. There are those who have a vision of where they want their organization to go, they have that purpose, and so they may hire differently or look for talent differently than somebody who is more of just a manager of the present. Right. They're just, "We need to sell more stuff. We need to hit this number." What is that balance for you between hiring for a current open position and also hiring for something that may come up in the future that would be beneficial to the company?

Nicole: It's tough because you want that, you want, let's say you're a 30 person startup company and your sales team is being managed by somebody who's been with the company since the very beginning. And really that person's skill set is in marketing and they want to be doing marketing. They don't want to be doing sales. They don't want to be managing the sales team. It's always this push and pull between "Do we have the budget to bring on a director of

sales so that we can let our marketing person get back to what she or he does best?” And “When do we do that?” And I have seen companies, they just get a big round of funding and they go nuts on their hiring and then six months to a year later they realize that they hired too soon. They're spending too much money and they have to do a big round of layoffs, which is always too bad to see.

We tell everyone to wear their recruiter hat so that when you are hiring, you're not reactive. You're not hiring the first person who applies. You want to be out in the community building relationships, saying yes to coffee, saying yes to great talent, who wants your time so that you've got those relationships so that when you are hiring you're in a better position to do so.

Or at least maybe you've got options. You're still going to do a little bit of outbound sourcing, but you've got one or two people who, hey, maybe you went for a coffee or a beer with a couple months ago and they happened to be top of mind and they might be a great fit for whatever it is you're hiring for.

David: That ties into a philosophy of yours that I love. And that's, “Always Be Recruiting.”

Nicole: So I'm a big geek about “Always Be Recruiting.” It's like in sales where everyone knows your ABC's in sales, “Always Be Closing.” I'm *f*still trying to think of an acronym for Always Be Recruiting. So if anyone has one, let me know. I've come up with like “REDD, Recruit Every Damn Day.”

It's that principle of no matter who you are at the company, I want you to always be wearing your recruiter hat. If I could give you a hat that says “I am recruiting at all times” on it, I would, and I see companies who do that, have a huge competitive advantage. And I think communication and transparency is a big piece of that. Can you give two minutes of your weekly team meeting? Can you dedicate that two minutes specifically to recruitment so that everyone at the company, step one, knows what jobs are open, what it is that you're recruiting for? That's a huge gap I see.

And then the other piece of “Always Be Recruiting” is make it part of your job, especially if you're in a leadership or executive position. Make sure you carve out at least some time every week to be having conversations with prospective ... I call them future team members, people that you want to build a relationship with who might not be a fit for your company today. They might be a great fit, but they're not looking, they're happy where they are, but those people will turn into great candidates in the future, whether it's six months from now or five years from now. It's really important to be building and nurturing that talent community.

David: What are some of the ways that you recruit employees that some businesses might not even think to do?

Nicole: I think social media is top of mind for most companies now. So I won't focus on that piece. I think events is an underutilized area and thought leadership is an underutilized area. It doesn't have to be this big huge thing. You can take advantage of people who are already out in the community doing thought leadership, whether that's going to conferences or writing and publishing blogs online, wherever they're showing up. You can use that partly as a recruitment tool.

So great example: How about you've got somebody going out to speak at a conference in a city where you know you're going to have a presence, you're going to be doing a lot of recruiting there within the next six months? What about doing, spending 30 bucks, 50 bucks, on a social media ad, an Instagram ad with a little image of your team ... "We are hiring" or "Attention salespeople" or whatever copy you want to use, but using that as a way to build employer brand awareness and to attract those people into your company.

Another example would be, let's spend 250 bucks and let's have an open house. Have someone teach a, let's say you're hiring HR people or recruiters, let's have someone teach a "Copywriting for Recruiters" workshop. Bring them into your office environment, make it a memorable experience, some snacks, some drink, and that's your talent community. You've now brought them in, given them a memorable experience and maybe one or two or three of those people are gonna want to connect afterwards.

David: I love that idea of going in with the mindset of, you know, what am I going to give in this situation rather than what am I going to get out of it, right?

Nicole: Yeah. I try to always think that way. So with the employer branding event, for example, sure, you really want to help build your talent community, but what can you give first? You're giving a free workshop if you're hiring for that sales position, maybe you're bringing together four awesome salespeople from other companies, put them on a panel. So the attendees are getting something out of it. They're getting learning or networking or whatever it is.

[music]

David: So Nicole, we live in a very different time than our parents and grandparents. It's the exception rather than the rule to work at a company for say 40 years and get the proverbial gold watch at the end.

Nicole: [laughs]

David: In general, what I've seen, again in my experience is that loyalty is really quite low on both sides of the equation, both for employees and for employers. How do we keep ourselves in demand and marketable, especially as we get older?

Nicole: I think what happened is the boomer generation, they stayed at their companies for a long time and either retired or got laid off. And then the next generation saw them work for a really long time and work for maybe just a gold watch and a pension or get laid off. And so they decided, "Okay, I'm going to be loyal," but I'm also, "If a better opportunity comes around, I'm going to jump ship, I'm going to go somewhere new." And then the next generation, the millennials will quit their jobs, go travel, go do some self discovery, maybe take a course, and then go look for a new job. So it's this really huge shift as we know.

I think the challenge with that is really more so on the employer side because employers are really frustrated with the jumpiness, with the lack of stickiness of their team members where they feel like they're giving a lot and helping them grow in their careers. So then they might only be there for one year, two year, three years.

David: That's a lot of generational change. How do you stay up to date?

Nicole: We have to be geeking out on everything and going to conferences and taking courses within our own areas of expertise where we want to grow in our careers, but also sort of lateral to that. I always suggest that people go to a conference or pick up on a webinar in something that if you're in marketing, maybe go learn about, I don't know if you work for a tech company, go learn about something techie or, you know, really push yourself to learn. I think the ability to be curious and learn and get better and better every day is something that all employers are really looking for. They want that real energy and someone who's really self-driven and who's going to come into their company and be able to ramp up quickly. And if they don't know something, they're going to go out and learn it.

David: You're a millennial yourself. So talk to me about how you look at the different generations. Are all the stereotypes true? What are exaggerations at best? What do you see as you're doing the work that you're doing?

Nicole: Technically I'm a millennial. I think I'm called an older millennial. I kind of share characteristics with the generations above me, but then I also love a \$5 bottle of kombucha and my avocado toast. [laughs]

David: [laughs]

Nicole: So I think I have a unique perspective on it. We've got multiple generations in the workforce. It's hard to manage as an employer when you've got millennials who it feels like they just keep asking for more. You feel like you're giving to them, you're giving them opportunity, you're giving them learning, growth, responsibility, autonomy, all things that might make a Gen Xer really happy, but you feel like they're ... you feel like they just keep coming to you and asking for more vacation, more time off, more flexibility, more snacks in the cupboard. So it's definitely a challenge. But at the end of the day, I believe it comes down to the individual. I think it has a lot to do with your upbringing, with your worldview, with your beliefs. And there are

outliers in every single group. So you really can't assume that the stereotypes are going to be applicable to that one person. You have to give everyone an opportunity to prove themselves.

We need people in our companies. We need employees who are going to challenge the status quo and challenge our positions and objectives and views. And I love the idea of having a really, truly diverse environment with people from different age groups in different backgrounds who can all bring their particular perspective to something and play devil's advocate and push because that's how the greatest companies form, you know, when they've got that pressure to get better and better and better.

David: We've got this new rising generation, Gen Z. What seems to matter most to them in looking for a career?

Nicole: I don't know. [laughs] I wish I knew more about Gen Z. I'm still scratching my head. I'm getting to know that generation. You know, everyone talks about how they're so, so technologically savvy, which is great. They really care about the environment and care about sustainability and care about the world.

What we're seeing from a management — from an HR perspective — is how much we need to shift our management styles and be able to tweak our communication styles based on who it is that you're talking to. Almost like really bespoke, like very personalized communication and management based on who it is you're talking to, whereas in the past you didn't have to think about those things.

David: What suggestions do you have to help those generations come together and to do great work together?

Nicole: Keep communicating. I think empathy and understanding is huge. So creating opportunities to get to know people and get to know where they came from and get to understand why their work style is different from yours. And then the other thing is mentorship. We used to talk about knowledge transfer, but now we're talking about knowledge exchange. So can the Boomer share something with the Gen Z person and the Gen Z person share something with the Boomer and how can we encourage the sharing of knowledge and greater empathy and greater communication within our multigenerational teams?

David: Well — and it really goes back to what you talked about just a minute ago — which was this idea of learning, right? It's not just about learning more about your particular field or something that's a little different area of your industry, but it's also being willing to learn about the other people in the other generations in this case that we're working with.

[music]

Nicole: Absolutely.

David: Nicole, Beacon HR has five really cool values. Will you just list those off for us here?

Nicole: Thanks. Yeah, so they're, "Do awesome work," "Masters of our time," "Own it," "Go bravely," and "Better every day."

David: What I love about these is that they're active rather than passive. So often I see companies' values as attributes or qualities, like teamwork or excellence or inclusion, but that always leaves me wondering like ... "What do I actually do to live those values?"

Nicole: I think great values are action-oriented. Great values are proactive instead of reactive. And we wanted values that are descriptive. We didn't want them to sound corporate, because our environment doesn't feel super corporate. We wanted them to feel authentic to who we are. And another thing we didn't want is for this to just simply be a copywriting exercise. Something that we were going to paste on our website because it looks nice. We really wanted our values to be really observable behavior that we can use as a filter for hiring, firing, promoting, measuring success, celebrating success.

David: And how do you most effectively communicate these values and not only the values themselves, but also what they mean, what's behind them, the actions that are expected of those within your organization? And how do you explain those or communicate those to prospective employees as well?

Nicole: Yeah, repetition. We talk about this a lot actually. Values are really nice because they can frame a conversation or they can frame a meeting or they can frame a particular story. So if you're celebrating a success within your org or a failure, you can frame it within that particular value. We've just started using these specifically for giving each other feedback. So if you give a team member feedback, you have to identify which value it aligns with or doesn't align with.

David: I love that. Can you think of a specific, without incriminating anybody but any, any specific examples of, of how you've seen that play out?

Nicole: Yeah. So "Do awesome work," for example. That's an easy one. I got two calls from two different clients in one week about the same team member. And that was really easy for me to frame it and say, "This is 'do awesome work.' You are completely exemplifying this value." And we shared that publicly within our company as well. We've got a channel on our instant messaging platform where we can add a little gift to it and make it fun and everyone celebrates it.

David: Cool. That's great. As far as new or prospective employees coming in, is there a way to discover whether or not a prospective employee really shares your values without just flat out asking them?

Nicole: Yeah. Nice little exercise is, write out your values in one column and then in the next column write out a few interview questions that are directly tied to that value. So, let me think of an example. If you value — if you want people who are humble on your team, who are ego-less — a great question would be, “Tell me about a time when you failed. What was the situation? What did you do and what was the result?” And then you can go a little bit deeper, ask them, “Great, would you have done anything differently?”

So you can do that for all of your values, and I think that's really, really important to weave that through the entire recruitment process from the beginning all the way to the end.

David: So you hear this number of 8 to 10 seconds and supposedly that's how long a recruiter or a hiring manager spends with a resume. But there's a reason for that, right?

Nicole: It's not for lack of caring. We care about these people who've applied. We appreciate that they've taken the time to show interest in our companies. The reality is that we recruiters are often stretched. We have so much on the go from reviewing resumes to conducting phone interviews, to being in those in-person interviews, debriefing and strategizing with hiring managers, coordinating, scheduling, all that high touch candidate experience piece.

David: What's the balance? Or how does a person who's writing that resume include both the sort of that punchy information that is going to stand out off the page that the recruiter's looking for and also sort of tell a story about who they are?

Nicole: When I'm reviewing resumes, it's the “yes” pile, the “no” pile or the “maybe” pile. The “yeses” and the “nos” are usually those really quick ones. They're really easy to pick out. Is this person worth talking to right away or are they absolutely not worth talking to right away? But that “maybe” pile in the middle. That's where I'm looking for the stories and that's where I'm like, “Okay, this doesn't align perfectly to what we think we're looking for.” So then I'll actually go through and I'll try to read someone's career path, like a story, and I'll try to say, “Okay, they went from this company to this company. Oh, that's an interesting jump. I wonder why they did that.” Or ... “Oh, there was a gap in their resume here. They said they were doing independent travel for three months. Then it looks like they came back and it took them three months to find their next job.”

So that's when I'll really try to read a story. I don't like leaving people in the “maybe” pile. I like them to be a “yes” or “no.” That feels more efficient to me.

David: Would you recommend then that they sort of help and put in a line about how this, you know, next opportunity built off of the last one or the reason that they switched from one thing to the next?

Nicole: Yeah, absolutely. And some applications, the recruiters will select questions that you can answer. So it might say there is one line, you get a chance to say a little bit about you and what it is that excites you about this opportunity. On your resume, especially if you have a big gap. I would love to see why that gap is there. Were you taking a course? Maybe it's just like one bullet point with the dates, but I really would as the recruiter love to see that story. Maybe you were doing independent travel and you learned a skill that relates to this job. So I think people can get a little bit creative with it.

David: Nicole, you have another philosophy of discovering the MIT, which stands for "Most Important Thing."

Nicole: The MITs, those "Most Important Things," are the candidate's core motivators and those are really the pieces that's going to ensure a good, a successful hire, and a good long-term fit. Asking a candidate about those MITs as a recruiter allows me to then line that up with the company and I say, "Okay, are they going to get lots of learning and development opportunities in this role? Are they going to have a team that is super collaborative, super supportive and over communicative?"

Some candidates will say, "You know what? I've got four kids and the benefits are really great. The benefits package is the most important thing for me." And sometimes the company just can't offer that. So figuring out what those MITs are early on in the process is really highly correlated to long-term success for that person in their role.

David: Do you find that the MITs are sort of evenly sort of distributed between those tactical things like "I need a great benefits package. I need to be able to work from home," and the other side of "What do I really care about as a, as a human being? What values do I have? What do I hope to bring? What impact do I hope to have?"

Nicole: It depends on the company and the industry. If you're recruiting for a more corporate or traditional or maybe the average age at your company is higher, there are gonna be different motivations versus if you have really "purpose-driven, early stage, impact driven, you are there to change lives company," you're going to have a completely different set of motivators for candidates who are coming to you. And that's totally okay. It's just about recognizing and being aware of what those are, and a trend I'm seeing in employee engagement is really recognizing that not everyone is going to be motivated by the same thing. Not everyone likes to be rewarded in the same way.

So it's looking at, or having the ability to look at people more so on an individual level instead of, here's one thing that we know works across the entire company. It's having that individual lens.

David: In your experience, are there things that you find sort of transcend any organization, any sector, any industry, those things that are important to most people?

Nicole: Everyone wants to feel like their employer cares about them. [laughs]

David: [laughs]

Nicole: And to some extent they want a little bit of transparency into where the company has been recently in the last 90 days, where it is today, and where it's going. So I think if employers can care about their people, make them feel like they're cared for, and give that little bit of transparency, that goes a long way.

David: How are companies learning to customize the way they motivate and reward employees?

Nicole: I know there are some tech platforms that are coming out that help accompany reward employees based on how they want to be rewarded. And there's some really fun ideas around it. Like you get credits and then you can use that to go shopping in an online store, whether that's you want to use your performance reward for going out for a nice dinner or you want to buy a new set of, um, noise canceling headphones, whatever it is. They are really going down that path of customizing it for the person and getting really individualized. I think about any time that I've been rewarded in my career and that little jump that it gives you, um, that little extra motivation and excitement and buzz. I think it's really important.

David: Nicole, you mentioned that you've seen a transition where rather than HR being an obstacle, it's now removing obstacles.

Nicole: HR is really an accelerator. I think companies now are acknowledging more than ever that their people are the number one asset. Their people drive organizational success. It's the people who are going to achieve the goals and help the company win or not. So I very much see HR as the accelerator to the entire organization to make sure that the team is clear on what it is they need to do to get to success so that the team understands what the company's objectives are, so everyone's rowing the boat in the same direction. And also to spot opportunities for improvement around engagement and happiness and productivity

David: Considering the last 10 years of experience that you've had and the road ahead for you, what does the world of HR and recruiting look like in 20 years?

Nicole: It's so exciting. It's such a cool time to be in HR and recruiting. I think we're going to see more specialized career paths. We're already going into data and analytics into people operations. Whereas it used to be the recruiter is the generalist recruiter, they do all the things. Now we've got sourcers, we've got sources that are separate from recruiters. We have recruitment marketing specialists, we have people from all different backgrounds now coming into the profession. We've got people with PR and marketing backgrounds, people with PhDs,

We're going to be more accountable for companies achieving their goals. We're going to see this great leveling up of the profession as a whole.

David: This has just been awesome. I'm going to have to go back and listen to this episode like three times just to pick up on all the great stuff that you told me. Thanks, Nicole.

Nicole: This was so much fun and I'm so, so excited about the work you're doing to share knowledge. So thanks so much for having me.

David: So much good information and so much passion.

[music]

David: I'm David Mead. My thanks to Nicole Davidson, founder and CEO of Beacon HR, and thank you for listening.

We hope you'll subscribe for more episodes of Behind The Talent so you can meet more experts in identifying talent, people who love what they do, as much as Nicole does.

On our next episode, someone who has never read a spy novel but spent 33 years at the Central Intelligence Agency. In fact, Carmen Middleton Rose through the ranks to become the deputy executive director, the fourth highest official at the CIA.

[tease of next episode]

Carmen: If you really do believe in this mission and talk about this mission and what a career could look like, probably 9 out of 10 might be really convinced that they'll give it a try. Obviously we're looking for the best of the best.

David: Carmen Middleton, identifying the talent that helps to protect our country on the next Behind The Talent.

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