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with Barbara Best

Transcript: How Humans Work Has Been Turned Upside Down (interview)

Barbara: How humans work around the world has been turned upside down this year, with a dramatic and sudden shift to remote work. Some of us have grown to love it; some of us have grown to dislike it immensely. Today's podcast offers a few productivity strategies and a lot of practical advice on how remote operations now and in the future can be conducted.

Hi, I'm Barbara Best and this is Humans Working Remotely. A podcast where I'll show you how to meet the expanding needs of your organization by utilizing alternative solutions for operational staffing, through expert insight and meaningful conversations with business professionals. We'll talk about common challenges and proven strategies that will provide you with more time to focus on your organization's mission, relationship building and other high value growth activities.

My guest today is Karen Brownrigg, Founder and CEO of iHR Advisory Services. Karen is an accomplished senior human resources leader, certified executive coach and business strategist, with more than two decades of experience leading transformational mission critical, security, sensitive and crisis management issues and initiatives.

Welcome Karen. Thank you for joining me on today's podcast.

Karen: Thanks so much for having me on the show Barbara, I really appreciate it.

Barbara: So, HR is definitely a hot topic these days with everything going on many twists and turns and folks trying to just cope and navigate with their new working reality their new normal. So, let's just dive right in. We're no longer in a controlled or in-person environment and workplaces. That is forprofit and nonprofit organizations are impacted. They're in turn upside down and have had to take many different forms. How do these new work environments impact on company process and policy in your view?

Karen: Well, I think first and foremost, companies really need to be focusing on an open dialogue with their employees about what their telework policy looks like. Like how we used to call it telework.

Barbara: I remember...

Karen: Right? Yeah. There's some longevity to that now it seems, and also pleasant discoveries that perhaps the jobs that we thought needed to be performed in an office environment can be highly productive in an off-site format. And now that people are working within the home environment, we need to be looking at what it means to support them in that new workplace. So remote work, off-site work policies need to be updated to reflect that and also to ensure that employees understand what supports are available to them from an ergonomic sense. So how are we setting up the work environment? What are the costs

associated with that? Who's responsible for those costs for workplaces that the employees are working in. I'm saying "workplaces" because I know we'll get into it a little bit later.

Barbara, though some people love the ability to work from their home office, and some people really don't love that at all. So, I'm saying "workplaces" because people are looking for alternative options in cases where they're not able to go back to the office environment that existed previously. So, safety considerations: what's the ergonomic setup? How do people feel about that, and designing the policy around that, so that managers have the tools and support that they need to be able to apply those practices in a consistent way so that we're not seeing one team doing one thing and other team is doing another. So, for sure, looking at the policies and looking at a process for ensuring that there is that touch point. So, when we have a mixed workplace now where some people are working part of the time at the office, other people are still working remotely and may do that indefinitely. How do we make sure that we have the team connected with and across those various platforms work/workplace platforms that we find them working in? So, making sure we've got a process for that, and making sure that managers are trained on how to use that process.

Barbara: And would you suggest that it's a collaborative process, developing a remote work policy, that is, managers talking to employees and collaborating? What's great, what works well for everyone involved? Or is it just, you know, an "us and them" kind of thing?

Karen: Absolutely. I think the best way to do it is a collaborative approach. A lot of our clients have called us, and what we do is we have a confidential conversation with the team. So, we'll set up a zoom meeting with the team and say, "Hey, (privately without any managers present), what worked, what didn't work? And, you know, how could this be co-created? And so we get some really honest feedback around what's working, and what are some of the challenges for people, and then we bring that back to the leadership team so that they can then engage with their team members, and they could do this on their own too. They could engage with the team members and really design something for the hear and now that's going to sustain into this transition phase because we are a long way away of understanding what the new normal is going to be. We may be two years away from that.

Barbara: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, I bet you've got some good stories to tell!

Getting back to the seriousness of this interview: what are a few productivity strategies for people who work remotely and totally love it and for those who work remotely and totally dislike it?

Karen: Well, interestingly enough for the people who are working remotely, who totally love it, when we're helping them design strategies around productivity, it's to really help them focus on giving themselves permission to take a break, right?

Barbara: Yes, of course, because they can just run away with it, right?

Karen: Yeah, they get in the flow, and before they know it, their backside has been melded to their chair and can't remember the last time they got up to take a break. They don't even know what it looks like outside and so we are helping them be deliberate around setting some time aside to actually leave that particular work environment. So whatever that means, maybe a different location in that workplace, the remote workplace, home in this case, or you know, getting outside, getting some fresh air, going to do something because there's this interesting sense of guilt for taking that time, feeling like they're sloughing off and we try and help them understand, when you were in the office, and you walk down the hallway to make yourself a cup of tea or get yourself water, whatever, that was a break. Sometimes to a colleague in the hallway, you might take an extra 5-10 minutes to talk, that was okay then. Yeah, so what's it going to be that makes it okay now for you to take those breaks away and continue to be okay about that. So, strategies around blocking time, letting people know that they're blocking time to do that; getting validation that it's okay to do that.

In many cases, people say, of course, like you've got to be taking a break, because we're spending longer periods of time for those of us who are quite comfortable working remotely like that, longer periods of time focusing and being present in a Zoom meeting or working on an activity online and so on. So, the "for" working remotely people, yes, strategies around taking breaks. And the folks who really don't love being away from the office, it's helping them design a strategy around, obviously, where possible, we look forward to helping them be some of the first people to put their hands up to go back to the workplace, if that's in the cards for them. If not, then we help them recreate another workplace elsewhere. Sometimes it's because it's at home. So, there's something distracting me at the home; it may be that there are other people in the house, their children or other people that live in the same household. It could be "I don't like my work environment because I'm in the middle of my living room", and so that makes me not want to be relaxing in my living room anymore because it's now a workplace, or I can't concentrate because I need to physically displace myself and flip that switch where I'm getting in my car or getting on public transit, (or maybe not so much these days), but I'm going somewhere for the purpose of work. So, we help them strategize around different options of what it means to go somewhere for the purpose of work. And it may be that a friend has a really nice home office they're not using, that they can go and work out of that location. It may be that they're working out of a collaborative workspace, of which we have many now that employers are often subsidizing for employees who are not finding it super fantastic to be working from home. They're subsidizing collaborative workplaces where their employees can go and work out of an office and close the door and flip that switch. To help them be in the moment or in the zone of work, rather than being in the zone of home. Some people really do have that. And I think it's wonderful, completely segregated in their mind. So, they're in constant dissonance about working at home, it's just not computing for them.

Barbara: And following on that, are there any trends that you're seeing with these two groups, those who are "for" and those who are "against"? Are there any cool trends that you haven't seen before that are coming up for you?

Karen: Yeah, for sure. I think the pendulum can't swing too far in one direction. You know, we hear about Spotify this "Hey, you know, we're banishing offices, everybody's going to work remotely" and doesn't. It's not a one size fits all, that's really problematic.

Barbara: Yeah, I agree.

Karen: Nobody wins and somebody loses, and I think the trend that we're seeing is, and I'm in strong favor of this trend, that leaders in organizations are really stepping up and engaging their team members in a dialogue around what the art of the possible is. So, individual circumstances are different. We've got school looming on the horizon. Parents have been homeschooling and trying to navigate working when there's kids at home and that kind of stuff. So these things need to be taken into consideration, personal circumstances needs to be taken into consideration. And I think the organizations that are doing that, that are engaging in that dialogue to say, "what is our mix based on the members of our team today"? How can we design the work around the personal circumstances, the professional engagement that people want to have? How do we do that? And it really is a co-creation model to get it right. And it's an ongoing fine tuning. So, it's not a one and done kind of thing. It's a monthly check-in at first and then probably a quarterly check-in once people have found their groove in that, just to see, you know, do we need to make any adjustments, but I think, work that we didn't think would work remotely, works.

So, and it's more commonly accepted now to have Zoom meetings or Team meetings and so on. People that didn't use technology at all for their work in this way, are now very comfortable doing it. So, what I'm seeing is a trend on people moving out of town. They're moving further out, because they can. So, they're actually changing their location. And because there's more flexibility, and they're spending a little bit more time doing things that were important to them, spending time with important people in their lives, spending time focusing on their hobbies, because they're not spending time commuting to

and from work. And the folks who really love the whole going to the office, for them, life is copacetic, and probably slightly more improved because we have less people on the roads. So, it's not taking as much time to get to the office as it did previously. So, it's really an interesting dynamic where the set time of day we're seeing used to be like eight to four, or nine to five, and now what we're seeing is more flexibility in terms of when the work gets done. And a shortened window within which people need to be available for collaborative discussions, whether in person or via technology, like, everybody in the workplace needs to be available between ten and two, because that's when we're going to have our collaborative meetings scheduled. Outside of that manage max-flex however, you want to be scheduling your work day as long as client calls are responded to or whatever the nature of the business is. It's an interesting change in perspective around, you know, the old term 'presenteeism'.

Barbara: Yeah, it is. I think there's a whole general shift, whether on purpose or just because we're dealing with a pandemic, there's a huge shift on work life balance across the board. I think it's all good, too. I really do.

Karen: Yeah, I do. And I think, to some degree, we may have lost the balance.

Barbara: Yes, I would agree with that.

Karen: And yeah, but I do think we are winning on choice. So, people have more options available to them about work location, about the time of day to perform the work that might be more conducive to their own personal circadian rhythm. I think there are more choices available. I think it's just getting comfortable with making those choices.

Barbara: Yeah, I agree. I think as a society, we've realized, "yeah, this really is okay". You know, this remote working thing, this can really work because we have to do it, but also it's coming to our advantage as well. So, we've demonstrated to ourselves that yes, we can have a more balanced life, and things are possible and everything's good. Absolutely.

Do you have any suggestions, Karen, to help manage distractions during the day? Those distractions that come up for employees, and also maybe ones that come up for the employer from an operations perspective?

Karen: Yeah, absolutely. I think in terms of the employee perspective, managing distractions is really about, you know how you've created your own, like people who struggle with sleep. They say create your own sleep ritual before bed; create your own ritual, whatever that's going to work for you, that gets you into that relaxed mode where you're slowly, you know, turning off all of the distractions that will have a negative, same kind of thing. Create your own anti-distraction strategy. Right? So, for some people, having background noise is important. So, you know, do you have headphones on? Are you listening to music to kind of tune out the world around? How do you tune out the world around you? Does that mean that you're behind a closed door with absolute silence? Does that mean you can be in a very noisy environment because that works for you? Some people work really well out of a coffee shop. Or, you know, you put headphones on, and then engage in a dialogue with your employer around how to support that. So, like we spoke about earlier, is it a collaborative workspace where you can actually go into a closed office and do that work in a collaborative workspace because you don't have that quiet, no distraction at home. What other equipment might you need, like headphones or whatever, that you can listen to music and tune that out. Maybe you're finding an open environment in your home, but all you need is just that, you know, block out the noise, but you're okay with visual distractions. It's really personal. And it's important that people spend the time sitting down and actually writing out what it is that is causing the distractions. And then on the counterbalance of that, identify what it is that's going to protect them from those distractions and apply it. Right? And engage in a dialogue with other team members. Most organizations are having coffee check-ins online or whatever.

It's really interesting to hear other people talk about what their personal strategies are. You can get tips and tricks from people on your team who have come up with some pretty cool strategies. You know, I know a friend of mine has set up kind of like a little space in their open concept living room where she can pull a curtain closed. It's kind of like a work tent and the kids know not come anywhere near the work tent.

Barbara: Yeah, that's a good idea. Really a good idea.

Karen: She needed to block out the visual distractions because she was tempted to kind of look in and see what was going on. But it's very personal.

Barbara: And anything for the employer from an operations thing, I mean? It must be disruptive from an operations perspective as well, because all of a sudden your entire workforce is no longer in the building, and they've been remote for the last five months. Is there anything you can suggest to keep the employer, or even indeed the management team, on track and being productive all the time as well?

Karen: I think it's really, really important with a team that's now working virtually to have very efficient and deliberate check-ins so you know, it's kind of like the equivalent of a stand up meeting, but on technology, whatever technology they're using, is an agenda about what are we talking about? What do we need to get through this check-in? How's everybody doing? Are we working to our objectives? You know, what are the barriers? And how are we navigating those. It's going to take much more time to stay connected than one would realize. And there's some, you know, very efficient meetings that need to happen. And you need to be deliberate about it. Like we can't, you know, today we can just say, hey, how's it going? And we're right into work because we've got just a half hour for this stand up meeting, we make sure work deliverables are good, but also to have some, you know, check-in time where it's just personal. We're just connecting like we would in the hallway when we ran into each other or casually if we decide to sit down and have lunch together. We're not getting that in person "Hey", you know 'How was your vacation?' or 'what's going on with the fam?' and 'how are how are things there?' Making sure you've got that time scheduled in is super important. And then also, operationally making sure that people understand when there's going to be a meeting blackout. It is so critical when we're spending so much time being "on" if you will, or incredibly present in these online meetings to make it okay for whatever, a half day or full day every week where there are no meetings to be scheduled ,because we need more meetings now to stay connected.

Barbara: Yes.

Karen: We need to be protecting some head down work time or even just mental health break time like "I'm not going to be able to work." Like just where you know protected time where we're not having any meetings? I'm absolutely fried. I'm checking out, I'm going to go for a run or I'm going to go and spend time with a good friend and laugh and make that okay.

Barbara: So, my last thing Karen today is we're at the end of August already. And the back to school is, I've written here coming up fast, I want to say looming up fast. So do you have any thoughts on how we can help prepare for a new school year. When September comes, it's all hustle and bustle, everybody's back to work and school. But this year, it's a little bit different. How can we prepare for our new way of working? Whether it's if we're working remotely if we're going to the office or maybe a hybrid of the two? Are there things that can help us prepare for the near future in our new way of working?

Karen: Well, I think that we have some important learnings now from what we've experienced with parents who are at home. Single parents, dual parents, who have been some degree in the early days at least doing some homeschooling while trying to work and taking turns, you know, who's on duty to make sure the kids are okay or the kid is okay and who's able to focus on work and so on. And then also on the reverse side, we have employers who are transitioning folks back to the workplace, either full time or on

a part time basis. And we still have this parent, this situation where parents are, you know, trying to navigate. You know, whether they have children in primary school or children in high school. Primary school kids right now are going back to full classes. full time, whereas high school kids are doing a mixture of in-class, very little in-class and more online stuff. So, we still have parental supervision requirement in the home, which is also the workplace. And I think that this may create a tremendous amount of anxiety for parents whose employers are saying, we need you back and they've got kids still at home. So that dialogue needs to start happening now around how that transition might look for those individuals in those workplaces, to ensure that we're not in a situation where we've got, you know, exorbitant amounts of anxiety unnecessarily when things could be navigated around. I mean, there are some circumstances where it is what it is, right, that there may be that the nature of the job, just cannot be, you know, those folks were laid off. And now that they've returned back to work, this is not a job that that is doable from a remote perspective, that's kind of the exception to the rule. But really considering that you can't just flick a switch. And we've got, you know, this transition plan, and this is how this is going to go and so on and so forth. We still have some external input now, and in this case, the school system is trying to build its airplane while it's flying. And parents are now trying to navigate Okay, 'what does my work schedule look like? And how do I plan for that with my employer?' I think we've got a number of weeks over the next, you know, period of time where there's going to need to be some tweaks as this changes, so parents who selected a certain option between now, and I think November, was kind of the commitment that they had to make, might not select that option in the next semester. So, employers will be doing the right thing, I think, if they're engaging in that dialogue and trying to customize this around their employees, rather than having their employees kind of being forced to fit into a transition plan.

Barbara: Excellent advice. Thank you.

Barbara: So that's it for us today. Karen, if you'd like to provide a little more about you just an impromptu blurb, so that our listeners know more about you and where to contact you, that would be awesome.

Karen: For sure. Thank you. iHR Advisory Services: we're a team of certified HR professionals. Most people don't know that HR is in fact a regulated profession, much like the legal profession and the accounting profession. So, the folks on my team are certified HR professionals and also certified executive coaches at the Masters level. So, businesses outsource all or portions of their human resources requirements to us and we become an extension of their team and we co-create the HR program that's suited to that workplace to ensure that it really does support the culture and the people and allows them to grow and build on their existing HR program. We're located in Ottawa, and we have clients across Canada. So, I guess what separates us, is that we have expert knowledge on the operational application of employment law in the various provinces and certainly in different workplaces.

Barbara: Where can our listeners reach you?

Karen: If you want to visit our website, you can find us at www.ihradvisoryservices.ca and you can connect with us through the website or you can contact us at our office line 613-686-6364.

Barbara: Wonderful. Thanks very much Karen, very, very interesting stuff. Thanks for joining me today.

Karen: Thanks for having me on the podcast, Barbara. Appreciate it.

Barbara: In closing, I'd like to thank you so much for listening today. I hope this information is helpful and I look forward to providing you more. I'm Barbara Best, CEO of Virtual Works Inc.

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