



The World Changer Podcast
Ep8 Alumni ambassadors

Elle Bradley-Cox 00:08

Welcome to World Changers, a podcast exploring the trends making an enduring mark on our world of work, and how business leaders, HR teams and internal communicators can stay one step ahead.

Elle Bradley-Cox 00:26

There's no such thing as a job for life anymore. But you'll certainly remember what it was like to work for your former employer long after you've left. Now, will you look back with fond nostalgia? Or shudder at the toxic culture you endured? Alumni networks offer a rich seam of advocacy when companies get the employee experience right. Lisa Hawksworth chose this theme as her World Changer for our 2022 report. In this episode, I speak with Lisa and our colleague, cultural anthropologist and former lecturer, Dr. Alex Gapud to find out about harnessing the power of the alumni network. Lisa Hawksworth is our director of consultancy at scarlettabbott with extensive experience in insights, culture, and measurement. So this topic really couldn't be more in her wheelhouse. Lisa, thank you for joining me on the World Changers podcast. It's a pleasure to have you here.

Lisa Hawksworth 01:20

Thank you for having me.

Elle Bradley-Cox 01:22

So, what inspired you to write alumni ambassadors in the first place? What have you been observing in organisations?

Lisa Hawksworth 01:28

I think it's really interesting, when you look in organisations, how much effort is placed on communicating with the existing employee base, or even the advocacy and the brand that communicates with a potential employee base. But actually, no one knows where the skeletons are buried as much as the employees that work there. And once they've left, they're free to say anything without ramification. And you can't change their mind, you don't have the channels to change their mind anymore. And so, protecting your alumni network, nurturing that alumni network, is not only a great part of your brand advocacy, but it also might attract returning talent, or attract new people to the business. We're hearing the stories authentically and firsthand.

Elle Bradley-Cox 02:16

Yeah, because everyone's connected, right? And so everyone knows someone who worked somewhere. And those stories go on the grapevine. It's interesting, we use the word 'nurture' when the word 'alumni' is the Latin for 'to nourish'.

Lisa Hawksworth 02:29

Oh, very interesting. Because, on that network, on nurturing that network, everyone's heard a story. "Oh, it's horrible to work there." "I had a manager there, and they were awful". That could be one nugget, could be a drop in in 1,000 drops. But you remember that story. You hear it? So, the more you can protect your alumni network, and the more you can give them a positive experience, the better that ripple effect is going to be.

Elle Bradley-Cox 02:56

I completely agree. We all have those stories, don't we, of the people we used to work with? But also, we have the stories of the amazing mentors that we've had.

Lisa Hawksworth 03:04

Exactly, exactly. There's one company that I used to work for that I still absolutely wax lyrical about, and they were brilliant. I've loved working with them as a client here. I still talk positively about them. I hear now on the ground from alumni that the culture has changed. But my experience, 10 years plus, is still going "what a great culture, what a great place to work."

Elle Bradley-Cox 03:28

And also, if they're a company that sells something or sells expertise, you're probably likely to buy from them.

Lisa Hawksworth 03:34

But also you're more likely to go and work for them. You know? What are you going to believe? A brand book or a human?

Elle Bradley-Cox 03:39

Totally. So where have you seen it done really well?

Lisa Hawksworth 03:44

I think there's lots of companies that do it well, but they probably don't publicise it as much. Also, there's lots of companies that do it badly where as soon as somebody hands in their notice it's like 'laters!'

Elle Bradley-Cox 03:55

I know, it's so bad! And when they cut off their Office 365 account almost immediately as they walk out the door or whatever it might be. I understand there's a security thing there. But also, it's checking in with people on Teams on your last day or whatever it might be.

Lisa Hawksworth 04:08

It's treating people as humans, you know, Procter and Gamble. they've had an alumni network that's in its 20th year. Now, that's quite formal, There's a global conference. You get the thinkers talking and reimagining a better world. They talk about empowering communities, you know, they treat it as if the alumni can have the answers to bring in their external experiences and continually benefit Procter and Gamble.

Elle Bradley-Cox 04:31

Totally. And, they're looking at their alumni and going, actually, these people had great skills or we wouldn't have hired them and if we can nurture them and bring them to something as kudos bearing as a global conference and say, "Actually, you're potentially the world's greatest thinkers and doers, you could help us solve climate change."

Lisa Hawksworth 04:50

I mean, what an absolute winner, right? So you're going here are people who we know are smart, who we know understand Procter and Gamble, bring them together. Bring the best of their brains together and take that knowledge as well. But also, we know, there's no such thing as a job for life anymore. But that doesn't mean you can only work at one company once. And so those alumni might see parts of interest and want to come back as their as their career grows and develops.

Elle Bradley-Cox 05:15

Or, you know, they might be approaching retirement age, have more free time on their hands still want to keep their hands in and have some interesting expert experienced views that can help shift the dial and have the time to do it because they're approaching retirement.

Lisa Hawksworth 05:28

Yeah, exactly. And it's all about how you look after people. It's not just policies and processes. It's not just the human angle. It's both of those together, right? That's how they work. Because if one is incongruous to the other, it's just bullshit. But you know, Monzo - period of redundancy, hard time for their business. They had to let people go, but they looked after them, they offered offboarding, and they offered a website that helped them to find new skills, and they publicised it. So tick for the alumni but tick for Monzo brand - great bit of PR. Secret other tick - Monzo might grow again in the future, it is growing and will grow again in the future. Those people had a great experience. they're going to come back, at least some of them.

Elle Bradley-Cox 06:14

They've got this wonderful culture, they call their people 'Monzonauts', and I'm pretty sure their alumni is called 'alumnauts', which I think is super cute. So, in the report, you've touched on the great resignation, now what impact can alumni networks have in turning the tide on this?

Lisa Hawksworth 06:31

I think I've said about the human angle quite a few times, but you've got to realise that there's a real financial risk to not looking after your people, to not portraying your brand right and not attracting the people. So, we know that it costs about £3,000 or £4,000 to hire a new person. If you've got holes in your business, it's about £3,000 or £4,000 pounds in terms of recruitment costs, etc., on average, to replace an exiting employee. That

increases tenfold. It's about £30,000 because that's loss of productivity, changing team morale, you know, just the cost of exiting somebody the cost of hiring somebody else as a result. So, there's a huge financial risk of people leaving and exiting the business. But the smoother you can make that in terms of maintaining that productivity, in terms of making people looked after, the smoother you can make that in terms of getting people in. Not having to invest in lots of recruitment fees, will ultimately benefit your bottom line.

Elle Bradley-Cox 07:34

And that's not just HR, right? It's the manager who's helping that person as they're leaving. I've been in businesses before where you always remember that colleague who walked out in a storm because their experience was so bad. And they're never going to forget that. Not only that, your team's never going to forget that experience that you gave them. And it might be a bit of both. But the way you handle that is very telling.

Lisa Hawksworth 07:59

Exactly. And of the colleagues who leave in their first 90 days, 43% say it's because it's not what they expect. The business is not what they expected.

Elle Bradley-Cox 08:09

Like, mis sold at the interview?

Lisa Hawksworth 08:11

Yeah, You told me you're this great business, you've told me you're this great brand. I mean, you might have told then you're a terrible business and a terrible brand! Hypothetically. But that's it, thousands of pounds, right there. Straight away. Gone.

Elle Bradley-Cox 08:25

Crikey. Seems like an investment in people and alumni is a smart option to make.

Lisa Hawksworth 08:31

Yeah, it's that whole journey. It's cyclical. You can't look at an employee journey as having a start and a finish. It's not end-to-end. You don't start on day one with all moonbeams and rainbows and you don't leave on day whatever kind of going "right, pack my bags and I'm gone". They're always there. They're always talking about your brand. They're always talking about their experience. They're always talking about how smart you are or how good your product is or how unsafe you are. And that that ripple effect is is huge. Absolutely huge.

Elle Bradley-Cox 09:03

What a fascinating conversation. Thank you, Lisa, for your time. Just for 10 minutes talking to me about alumni and where your head was at when you wrote this report, interesting. I hope our listeners got as much out of it as I did.

Lisa Hawksworth 09:14

Thanks Elle, lovely to chat.

Elle Bradley-Cox 09:22

A former lecturer at Edinburgh University, Alex is no stranger to the world of academia and its traditions. Alumni networks are a rich and important part of higher education. I caught up with Alex to see how he views the crossover from education to business. Alex, I see you posting all the time on LinkedIn about The Great Resignation and quiet quitting, and I feel like it's your cultural anthropology heartland. But what impact do alumni networks really have on turning the tide on this?

Alex Gapud 09:53

It's a good question, Elle. I think you know a lot of my slant on this as a cultural and organisational anthropologist is to think about work as a social and relational experience. I think the root of alumni networks starts with having a great experience in the first place, and also starts, I think, with forming a sense of community, right? And that's the relational side. Do you get on with the people that you work with? Do you have good experiences together? Do you have shared memories that you could draw back on? Do you all feel like you're a part of something? That goes way beyond your time at the company. You and I might work together for a couple of years. And then we run into each other 10 years down the road be like, "Oh, I remember that time that we did this podcast together" or whatever it is. I think there's a lot to be said, if you create those shared experiences, and you create that sense of community. That's what becomes the foundation of an alumni network.

Elle Bradley-Cox 10:49

You're so right. That comes back to my field, right? Storytelling. And it's those gleaming details that we remember, like doing this podcast together, just as a simple example. But we could meet 10 years later and because we've said that story and lived through that experience, it comes back to us. That's a memory. That's not data that we worked on together. It's a memory, and it's a shared experience. I think sometimes alumni networks can be the strongest driver in positive or negative colleague experiences, right?

Alex Gapud 11:20

Well, if you think about an alumni network of people who have been through that company, it's a way of keeping in touch with the company and its way of keeping them in touch with each other. And by each other, I mean, yes, the people you worked with, but also other people who have that shared experience, and who are part of that shared community. So, I think it is about being a part of something bigger than yourself. It's about creating something that people can be part of and participate in. That they can connect to. I also love what you said about storytelling. My PhD is a lot on how we remember things, and how we think about history. I think it's such an important thing. There's a lot of social theory of memory. Maybe this is a bit too academic for this podcast. But it's interesting, because a lot of times we can think, "oh, a memory is something that exists out there somewhere in the world, that it objectively happened." But, unless it's on camera, you're not actually going to remember it that way. I was home with my parents back in May and they met my new wife. We met after two months after being married, we're seeing my parents, and my mom would be like, "oh, yeah, I remember Alex when he did this on this day at school". And she's talking about something, and I'll be honest, I completely remember it differently. It's not to say one of us is right, or one of us is wrong. But it's that memory is a shared thing. You will each have a perspective on what that was like and what that happened. It comes alive when you come together and tell that story. It's something that that happened when I was eight years old on my

first day of third grade. But how we remember that could be different. That's also my mum and I building that relationship, and brought my wife into it, as we talked about that memory.

Elle Bradley-Cox 13:12

But equally, if for example, you've worked in a company that, maybe the company is not toxic, but your boss really was, you will unite around that theme as former colleagues. And maybe never set foot in that company or that industry ever again. But also, you can be the biggest advocates of that business, the biggest promoters. Now thinking of former employers, before you joined us, you worked in academia and alumni networks really thrive in that space. What can employers learn from this and apply in their organisation?

Alex Gapud 13:43

It's interesting, because I've gone to uni too many times at this point. And I'll say that in terms of our relationship with the university, I think that I have three different relationships with three different alma maters', none of them are financial, to be honest. They took enough of my money as it is, as three times over as an international post grad student. But it's interesting because I get to think about three different relationships, three different sets of friends through different communities. But also, I think one of the biggest things I think about is this gap and this difference between Unis in the UK. It's quite an individual experience. You don't really coalesce around being part of the university community. Yes, you're in classes with people you meet people through all that. But in terms of feeling like we're the University of Edinburgh, we have something that we we all do together. It's not necessarily the case in the UK. I'll tell you who does it really, well are Unis in the US. I'm from Atlanta, I went to the University of Georgia my first time around. And one of the things I do every Saturday in autumn. I am a grown adult man and it's been more than 15 years since I was a student there, more than 20 years since my induction, and I still religiously follow Georgia Bulldogs, American college football. These are 18- to 20-year-old kids playing a game. And 92,736 - that's the exact capacity of our stadium - that many people will go out every Saturday in the summer heat and autumn to watch our team. That's more people than Wembley. And what's crazy about this is partly the first thing you learn when you are a freshman at the University of Georgia, are not how to pay your fees, not where classes are, it's the football cheers. It's the school fight song, it's the chants. And that might seem really, silly. And you might think, "Oh, they don't care about academics", but Georgia is a top 50 Uni in the US. They do care about academics. What the football is about, is building that sense of community. When you go to a football game at the University of Georgia, what you're doing is you're taking part in the rituals and spectacle and tradition of that community. And the game isn't about, when you think about it that way, it's not about 18- to 20-year-old men playing a game. It's about a celebration of my community, I'm making a statement that my community is unique, my community is better than other communities. I know companies can't quite do something like get 90,000 people in a stadium. But the sense of creating a shared experience, shared community, something that you can all identify with, feel a part of, and feel a part of something that is bigger than you. And then to recreate that experience 24 times throughout your uni career, so that you can have all those shared experiences that you draw back on 20 years later, when you're talking to your mates, and you're like, "remember the LSU game when we were second years? That was awesome, wasn't it?" You talk about all those things, you can recreate in an office space of saying, "hey, remember, when we did that project together? That was so much fun, right?" And then you build that sense of community and closeness with that colleague with our project team as part of that organisation.

Elle Bradley-Cox 17:08

It's so interesting, isn't it? Actually, thinking about some of the teams that I've been working with recently, or observing, there has been some incredible innovation and agile teams moving together to deliver stuff really, really fast. And it's a small, tight knit team that lives and dies and breathes by its team. And it's hard, bloody work. But I wonder if, and this is putting you on the spot, but some of the rituals that you've just talked about, do you think that's part of a team that succeeded if a team that innovates? Is it slightly ritualistic? What might some of these things be?

Alex Gapud 17:43

I think you'd bring a good example with Agile there, Elle, because the terminology of agile often is explicitly about that. It's about squads, and tribes and scrums and celebrations. Some even call it the ritual, when they debrief, depending on the team and their unique culture. I think that's part of it. When you create those tight knit teams, they have those bonds, they have those connections, you're working with people all the time, constantly meetings with them, constantly relying on them to get things done, you pull the close connection with people. I think ritual is part of that. I think ritual is part of the fabric of any institution. I think if you formalise it, there's a risk of overdoing that so that it's just weird or creepy or doesn't fit in. But, it's something within the rhythm and the tempo of what you're doing as a team. I don't think there's anything wrong with thinking, "Hey, it's 4:30pm on a Thursday, that's our beer time." Or "we all take a break together at this time to do this". I think there's a lot of leeway to play with different ideas around what are some things that we can do together to bring us together to build those relationships that aren't just about the work, but because we feel those connections, because we feel part of something. It feeds into our work, and it feeds into our performance.

Elle Bradley-Cox 19:03

I'll let you guys on the podcast listening in into a little top-secret ritual at scarlettabbott, which is Throwback Thursday. So, every Thursday, we have a game that we play that you can do alongside working where basically, whoever's DJ for that day in the office will hit Spotify on Throwback Thursday playlist, and we'll have to wait for three songs before you can start guessing the theme of this week's playlist. And we know if you're cheating, we know if you're looking it up, it's too easy to tell. But it's part of the fabric and culture of being in places and it's not a big thing but Thursdays wouldn't feel the same without it

Alex Gapud 19:39

100% and it's funny, when you have certain people that partake in that ritual, that play that game to guess. And you know, like one second after that third song is finished, someone will come out with the same eight guesses they come out with every Thursday. It's silly. We're both having a laugh about it. But it's one of those things. It's like "oh, that's what Johnny does, and Johnny loves it." It's one of those things where again, you build that relationship, because work is about the stuff we do. But it's also about community. It's about the relationships and is about the social aspect of what we do.

Elle Bradley-Cox 20:15

Beautiful. I hope our listeners got a lot out of that, because I think there's loads of things that you can apply internally. And thanks for your time, Alex. My huge thanks to Alex and Lisa. If you have questions about alumni networks do join us later this month for our Ask an Anthropologist webinar where you can chat with Dr. Alex

Gapud. We will share the details in the session notes and on our social channels afterwards. Want to continue the conversation in the meantime? Do come and chat to us over on Twitter @scarlettabbott or drop us an email at hello@scarlettabbott.co.uk. We'll see you next time for another dive into World Changers 2022. World Changers is a podcast by employee engagement consultancy scarlettabbott hosted by Elle Bradley-Cox. Find out more at scarlettabbott.co.uk.