



Recorded Message: The Hennessy Report from Keystone Partners, a free-flowing conversation with leaders in the HR community talking about themselves, the industry, and their work. Brought to you in cooperation with NEHRA, the Northeast Human Resources Association.

Dave Hennessy: Welcome to episode three of the Hennessy Report. I'm Dave Hennessy, and this episode we have Russ Campanello, the VP of HR and Corporate Communications from iRobot. Great discussion with Russ. He made news early in his career. He talks and shares that story, and it's incredible. Really what he did was really a sea change, not just in the HR field. Quite a powerful story. That's right in the early part of the podcast, within the first couple minutes. Make sure you catch that. Later in the podcast Russ looks back with some humility on things he would have done differently starting off in his career. I thought that was interesting, and good of him to share. Plus, he offers a lot of wisdom and advice to the HR function and others in the field. It's just a great interview here, so enjoy it.

Also, we caught a little serendipity. Russ is the first winner of the Gatti HR Leadership Excellence Award at HRLF, he just received this week, so that was good timing. That award goes to in recognition in the legacy of Bob Gatti, which I learned a little bit more about. When Mike Fitzgerald received the Gatti Mentor Award down at NEHRA last month, I really have a better appreciation of what Bob meant to all the people that he touched in this community, and Mike shared that story very well on how much time Bob gave to people in the community.

I think it's great that the two largest HR organizations around here have decided to help Bob's name and reputation and legacy live on through two awards that they're giving out, so congratulations to Russ and Mike.

Before we get to Russ, a little bit about our next podcast. We have Andy Porter on episode 4. He's the Chief People Officer at the Broad Institute, and a very inventive and progressive HR leader, so you'll be hearing him in a couple weeks as well, so look forward to that one. And I bring you Russ Campanello.

Hello, Russ. Thank you for joining the podcast. It's great to have you.

Russ Campanello: Thanks, Dave. It's really delightful to be here.

Dave: Here we are at the iRobot headquarters, but you did not start your career here. I know a little bit about it, but I think for our listeners it'd be good to know did you pursue HR, what were your first steps in your career, just a little bit about the background of it before we get into some of the HR topics at iRobot.

Russ: It's a long story, I'll keep it compact.

Dave: There's some things I'm going to poke on, just so you know.

Episode 3 Russ Campanello iRobot .mp3



Russ: That's fine. I actually graduated from one of the University of Massachusetts schools, with a bachelor's degree in business management, but a concentration in human resources.

Dave: At Amherst?

Russ: At Lowell.

Dave: Right here, okay.

Russ: Yep. I graduated from UMass-Lowell, with a degree in management and a focus in human resources, which at the time was still called personnel, or industrial relations at the time. It felt very avant-garde to come out with the concentration in a role that the world didn't see that way.

Dave: Right, not many people were majoring in HR, at that time.

Russ: No.

Dave: Or focusing on it educational wise, right?

Russ: For me, it was really I started in engineering ...

Dave: Not that it was that long ago.

Russ: No, not that it was that long ago. I started in engineering, went all the way to psychology, and then settled back in business management, and the thing that attracted me to the human resources concentration was it seemed to be the equation to solve for employee satisfaction and culture and engagement and organizations were far more intrigued in calculation than marketing or finance. It seemed that there would be - for me - it would satisfy my curiosity and my problem-solving interest in a different way than those other disciplines would have allowed for. At least that's how I thought about it at the time, and I still feel that way now.

I came out with a human resources orientation. My first job was I was a recruiter for a placement agency, which I did for three years. I tell people that my moral development caught up with my intellect. I decided that if I was really going to do good HR work, I needed to do it in house. I went to work for a company that doesn't exist anymore, Wang Laboratories, that was one of the early mini-computer companies, like Digital Equipment.

Dave: It might be some parallels with iRobot changing their focus on products with Wang not changing their focus on products. I don't know if you want to talk about that now or later.

Russ: That would be an interesting concept to plumb. I was actually with Wang when it transitioned itself from word processors to mini-computers. I also happened to be, how I got there I'm not quite sure, I happened to be in the room when senior management made the decision that they weren't going



to port their acclaimed word processing software to the PC, that they were not going to sell word processing software for the PC, as it had just come out from IBM and a couple of players, because they thought of them as toys.

Dave: Ah. It was below them.

Russ: It was not their strategy. I remember thinking about it, because I had just heard about this other company coming out that was building a spreadsheet for PCs, called Lotus, and I thought wow, it seems like if the market is moving toward desktop computing, or PC computing, capturing that as it happened would have been a good idea. But it didn't happen. Just my little piece of history. It was soon after that they began their long decline, a very sad story. Many wonderful people came out of Wang Laboratories. I moved right about that time, right after the first couple of layoffs in 1986, I believe it was, I moved to Lotus Software, Lotus Development Corporation.

Dave: In the HR function.

Russ: In HR. They hired me to run HR.

Dave: That's really young in your career, right? To get the head of HR job.

Russ: They hired me to head HR for the sales division. They had turned through six HR people in two years, and they thought they would try this guy, see what he could do. That I had a very successful role with the sales team when the top job came open, I was a candidate. I remember they did a search for nine months, I was interim leader for nine months.

Dave: For the whole organization.

Russ: Right. They couldn't find someone or relented to my active inquiry about getting the job, and they appointed me actually it will be 30 years ago in March, I got my first HR leadership job at Lotus Development Corporation. Stayed with them for 10 years through the acquisition of IBM. IBM wanted to go in a different direction with HR, and I wasn't part of that direction, so they let me go.

Dave: Before we go onto that, can I ask you about Lotus, because you made some news at Lotus. You were on the *Today Show*, you actually got involved with I forgot her name, Mary ...

Russ: Oh, Gentile.

Dave: Mary Gentile, yeah, with Harvard Business.

Russ: Yeah, so one of the prouder pieces of work I ever did was in 1992, Lotus had decided they were going to provide the partners of our gay and lesbian employees the benefits equivalent to the spouses of their heterosexual employees. What simply seemed like the right thing to do, and fairness from a compensation standpoint, at the time about 10 percent of our workforce, turned into quite a story, and



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I'd like to think that we added momentum, we were the first publicly traded company to do this, added momentum to a trend of recognizing the spouses of gay and lesbian people in the world. Certainly, a good place to do that was business.

That got me on the *Today Show*. There's a Harvard Business School case on this decision and how we made it and the implications of it remains one of the prouder pieces of work I've ever done, not because I did it, but because it was simply one of those things you're confronted with as an HR person, kind of intrinsic on fairness, of that became clear. We just decided to do the right thing. It wasn't just me who did it, it was I had a great comp and benefits guy at the time who figured out a way to get our insurance companies to participate, and there was a gay and lesbian community in iRobot that helped me understand ...

Dave: In Lotus, yeah.

Russ: I'm sorry, I keep doing that. At Lotus that helped me understand the inherent unfairness of it. I tell the story in the business case that I was in the midst of a divorce at the time, and had been married five years, and was getting a divorce. And the woman, Margie Bliteman, three really incredibly, smart, capable, kind thoughtful women who kind of brought the case to me, Margie Bliteman, Polly Longchild, and Andie Kennovan. Margie had been married for, had been with her partner, she couldn't obviously be legally married at that time, for I think they'd been together almost 15, almost 20 years, and I remember thinking I had a marriage that failed in five, and I represent the model of what society expects, and here was this committed couple for 15 years or more living their life successfully despite all the social challenges that a lesbian couple would face at the time.

Thankfully that's progressed, but it helped me understand the inherent unfairness that existed in that community. There was lots of reasons why the world was worked up about it. It was still in the midst of the AIDS crisis. There wasn't quite the dialog in the world that currently exists on gay...

Dave: That's what I want to talk to you about. I think some of our listeners that are younger might not really remember or know what it was like in the environment - the pressure that you were getting, or maybe some feedback that was not so positive. You got on the *Today Show*, there was a Harvard Business School case about you, but that was not all like that. You got some negative.

Russ: Oh, my goodness, yes. I had all that surgically removed. I received a tremendous amount of mail, most of it negative.

Dave: Most of it.

Russ: Well, I remember all the positives, but I do remember receiving Bibles and Bible verses. There were religious groups that boycotted our products. I received what would be described as threats at home and at work for corrupting the Bible's view of homosexual relationships. It wasn't without its controversy, for sure. We were also told that we were aiding the spread of AIDS, and it was not a particularly proud moment in our society's history as it related to tolerance.



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Dave: And not really that long ago, we're talking 25, 25 years ago.

Russ: 1992. It was 1992. It wasn't that long ago. I think the world has come a long way since then. I'd like to believe that that work that Lotus did on those benefits contributed to the momentum that results in my friends' gay lesbian or heterosexual being able to have their marriages recognized, and to the visibility the dialog that exists in society now about the importance of fairness with this community and our neighbors.

It was a remarkable piece of work. I hadn't thought about the negative side until you asked the question, but it was, yeah. I'm sure I kept some of the Bible verses. They reference one particular Bible verse, I got it about a hundred times, sometimes with a Bible, with people praying for my soul.

Dave: What's amazing is how did you have the courage pretty early in the career to do that, and how did the organization have the courage to do that. There must have been quite a leadership team that you had that supported you. It would have been easier to give it up along the way when you have a lot of that negative pressure.

Russ: There was a meeting at 30,000 feet in an airplane, on the way back from an event with me and I think the then CFO, and the head of comp and benefits. We had our insurance group was ready to walk away from the business if we decided to go ahead and do this.

Dave: Wow, and you're a lot much larger company then when you joined it then at this point, because you had joined a little bit before.

Russ: I had joined the company was about a thousand, we were probably a couple thousand lives at that point, maybe three thousand.

Dave: Right.

Russ: They were willing to walk away, the reinsurer was willing to walk away, and so we caucused at the back of a plane on a couple of items just came up, but head of comp and benefits described what his reactions were from the insurers, the CFO looked at me, and my head of comp, Keith, looked at me and he says well, what do you want to do? I remember it vividly because it felt like there were a million moments in our lives people listening to this and certainly for me at that moment where the direction pivots on your resolve at that moment. I remember looking at them and saying there are other insurance companies, let's go find another insurance company.

Dave: Wow.

Russ: And in the end when they realized we were serious, they didn't walk away from the business, and they used us as a model and began promoting the fact they could help their client companies offer benefits for their gay and lesbian employees, so it became a sales developer for them. It was clearly that



moment where we all are confronted, you were stuck between policy and fairness, or stuck between what we'd done in the past for what's right in the moment, where we had to make a call.

I remember at that point, you asked the courage, I'm not sure it was courage at that moment. I knew the CEO and I were aligned on it, I knew we had 10% of our employee base, some of the most gifted developers we had in the company were part of the community. The company had taken a very visible position in the fight against AIDS. It felt incongruent to me that we wouldn't take a leadership position on it. That's how it is that ...

Dave: I feel like saying congratulations 25 years later, but I never really heard the whole story, so that's a great achievement.

Russ: Yeah, it was quite a moment, quite a story. I think the world learned, thankfully, the world learned as a result of our experience that this wasn't a frightful or scary thing to do. It was prudent, it was fair. It didn't drive costs. In fact, it retained talent.

Dave: It attracted talent.

Russ: Yeah, I mean we had an advantage for a period of time on a community of talent that was looking to be recognized. We took advantage of the sense that we had a differentiated position with them. It fits for us at the time as it helped guide my thinking as I progressed in my career ...

Dave: Yeah, I was going to ask you next. Have situations come up like this again in your career, where you've been able to lean on that experience?

Russ: I think where it most comes up is the idea that everybody faces in the profession is our accounting practices still look at buildings as assets, and employees as expenses, and that sort of drives a gestalt and business thinking about the value of human capital.

Dave: Some people don't even like that word because it leans on what you were just saying.

Russ: Yeah, no. It's a ... no, I completely get it, if you misrepresent capital which means the most important thing, so there are all kinds of capital, there's human capital and social capital, there's financial capital, there is emotional capital, there's lots of different capitals, but if you think about it from our context in terms of talent that even though it's an expense it is the generative aspect of our asset portfolio, not that we count them as assets. And where we are confronted all the time we're trying to attract and retain the best talent from all the communities in which we recruit for, the idea of creating a differentiated strategy to attract a particular community, would that community now be women or people of color, or gay, the gay and lesbian, the LGBTQ community, that it's important that your policies serve as the beginning of the conversation not always the end of the conversation, and that we look at things for me this experience that early experience kind of defining for me as being willing to take a stand for a position that might be different, like the establishment of affinity groups inside of a company.



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Why would you do that? Well, because communities need a place to come to understand if their experiences are unique to the individual or common amongst the group. That insight helps organizations position themselves better for those communities of folks, and to be able to take that those lessons and to talk about them as our talent strategy says that we'll be a destination for every community in which we recruit, which means that we have to be a distinguished employer for every community in which we recruit.

Sometimes that's college interns, versus more mature professionals, but often it's discussion between people of color, majority, women, men, LGBTQ communities, straight, gay, the dry differences. It's not that the insight from that experience also helped me understand that you're not making when you make a company better for one of those communities, you're not just making it better for that community, you're making it better for everybody, and that it's important from a strategic standpoint that you fine-tune your environment to be that type of destination if that's what your company aspires to be, and to be able be willing to take a stand to make an argument or have a position as it relates to those needs.

Dave: You've had to make a culture shift here.

Russ: Yes.

Dave: Because you went from more military products to more consumer products, and I imagine the talent needs were dramatically different to make that shift.

Russ: That's the most obvious shift. We made an earlier shift when I joined, the company had two businesses about equal size, one in the military one in the consumer.

Dave: Oh, they were 50-50 when you joined.

Russ: Yeah, when I joined they were about even. They each had a unique culture. Then there was a third company, a third culture, the headquarters culture, and so after I was joined, I was actually at home reading, the results of the survey, the engagement survey they had just run, and I was reading it at home before I accepted the job, and I said wow, this reads like there's really three different companies.

Which it turns out there was a processes and talent standards and the like, so we went from three companies to one company, which is a good thing that we did because when the defense business as we were bringing home the troops from Iraq and Afghanistan they brought the robots back with them, and since there wasn't a need to replace them, or we weren't expanding our presence in those countries, there wasn't a demand, so the business started to fall away, and in some ways what helped that business survive was the fact that we had come together and made a common engineering team and a common operations group. While we were able to absorb some of the losses of that the fact that the defense business was going in a negative direction because of the structure we ultimately ended up having to lay off a large number of the team. I think we probably ended up laying off 200 people between 2011 and 2013, and so we reached kind of a level funding where the defense business could operate.



Dave: Is it still in existence at all?

Russ: Yeah. It's a great business. It's not a big business. The management buyout they bought a private equity partner and decided to spin the company out. The company iRobot decided to spin the company out. We completed that transaction in April of 2016 and launched the consumer brand of iRobot in July of 2016. The transition you're referring to had started once we identified the strategy for spinning out the defense business we also same time spun out our commercial business, our Ava Robotics business, to a company called Ava Robotics, to focus solely on the consumer business.

We just did a complete examination of our mission vision values, how we're organized. We've had to re-staff the company with consumer talent, value generator for the robot is increasingly driven by software so we've had to... And certainly having your ...

Dave: You mean it's less and less manufacturing, it's more about software, or a software company.

Russ: Yeah. The behavior consumers love and the functionality the robot exhibit are all software driven of course, and now that you can look at your robot's activity on your phone, you can start and stop it, you can look at its last few missions, you can see how much dirt it's picked up, you can now see a map of your home on your phone, which are all value propositions leading to more value for our consumer, which is all software driven, we've had to kind of restack here.

When we started the journey in consumer, we had a software engineer for every ten engineers. Now we have four software engineers for every ten engineers, and so we've really evened out. In doing so we've had to change the culture. A consumer cadence is very different than a military cadence. We're making tens of thousands of robots a month. In the military business you might make ten. Our whole business cadence has changed. The good news here is that the market loves our story. We've had our growth has accelerated, we're having..

Dave: And some good news recently

Russ: ... record quarters

Dave: 40% growth, is that what I heard?

Russ: In North America, for the last quarter, it was 40% growth. We've smoothed out to the 30's for the year. Globally we think that will be probably at least high teens, it could be higher. We enjoy 80% market share in the US, about an average of 60% around the world. Our penetration in households is increasing. We've had a lot of success. It's probably only 7% of the households that have a robot in their home. We think the market potential is enormous.

Dave: About robotics, with robotics Amazon Robotics is local, your organization, many others, and things are becoming more and more automated, what's going to be the human capital influence of so



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many things becoming automated? What are the jobs for the future employees? How's it going to change here at your organization? Or is it just a buggy whip thing, and we'll reinvent something?

Russ: Yeah, I think every wave of technology brings with it a talent question, and a concern. Every wave has something. When automobiles showed up you know livery drivers, horse buggy drivers were at risk. Without acknowledging the need for manufacturing jobs and generate more and more cars, I think for robotics, I think we're very early days in robotics. iRobot's been around ironically for 27 years, but if you talk to Colin or any of the execs here he'll tell you it's still very early days. It's 7% household penetration for a consumer robot for one task, vacuuming. It feels like it's very early days.

I think what's going to happen is one example, when iRobot moved to Burlington, I think it was 14 years ago, we were the only robot business probably in Massachusetts, or certainly within 20 to 25 miles. Now, there's probably about 100 companies that are robotic companies within a 25-mile radius of where we are now, many of them founded by ex-iRobot alum, which is great. Venture capital has followed, so there's a lot of money pouring into the robotics space, and we see that trend continuing. As much as we all hope that like the Jetsons there would be a Rosie that was a multi-function robot, we think the future is a series of task function robots that work in harmony around home ownership, whether that's vacuuming, mopping, window cleaning, lawn mowing, pool cleaning, we think the home will have a series of robots that operate in concert to maintain the home when the homeowners are away or when the homeowners need the assistance.

We think so the example of there being all these now robot companies nearby, there's been a tremendous amount of job growth.

Dave: And I imagine a war for talent in robotics.

Russ: A huge war for talent.

Dave: I just read *Time Magazine* yesterday said that Carnegie Mellon has a computer vision, driverless cars program, they're coming out as graduates getting \$200,000 base pays. You don't seem shocked by that from your nod.

Russ: No, no. Yeah, I'm sorry, yeah. No. We have been in competition for those candidates, \$180K with a \$300,000 stock grants for Ph.D.s, no experience.

Dave: Probably we should be sending our kids to computer vision robotics programs.

Russ: If you can influence your child into any kind of algorithmic development, whether it's navigation, deep computer learning, vision systems, send them. I don't have the data in front of me, but when I looked at it last year there were fewer of these folks in the market than there are professional football players. So, the laws of supply and demand are going to drive it. It was that way at Lotus when we were converting mathematicians and music majors into software engineers. The economics will attract the talent, so it eventually evens out.



The other thing that's become true is the speed of development, and the speed of getting innovation into the marketplace, that's really why there's a war for talent. But the war is not won or lost on your offer. It's won or lost on the environment you create and what you expose your candidates to as part of the process. The candidate market is so much more sophisticated now than it was even two or three years ago.

Dave: Because of technology they have a lot more information before you even talk to them.

Russ: And the talent that's in that kind of demand knows that they're kind of in the driver's seat, and they're selecting for things that are important to them. Organizations have always kind of selected for what's important for the organization, as opposed to selling what's in the interest of the candidate. What I think is terrific, and again another kind of an opportunity for innovation is this talent acquisitions space, and just the tremendous work that's been done in the profession around talent acquisition. No wonder it's more and more heavily weighted with marketing expertise, because we have begun to take our corporate brands to employment brands and begun to express our branding in everything that we do. We at iRobot survey every candidate that comes in for an interview.

Dave: On their experience, whether they're hired or not.

Russ: On their experience, whether they're hired or not. And what's the goal? The goal is to obviously improve our candidate experience, but it's to also make sure our benchmark is even if they don't get the job at iRobot they're still an advocate for our brand, but then when they go into Best Buy or Bed Bath and Beyond and they look at iRobot that they're still going to buy iRobot.

Dave: Right. Or they might work here at a later date or refer another candidate. Right.

Russ: Or refer a friend, all those things.

Dave: It's a chain reaction. How is technology shifting gears a little bit, change the HR function?

Russ: I think it's moved us out of the administrative burden. It's made us publishers, not ...

Dave: Tracy Burns said something similar, like did you hear our first podcast?

Russ: No. I think Tracy and I are similar that we saw the profession grow up with 60% or 70% of its work being administrative, and being our success was gated on the accuracy of our data, and it still is, but I think that we've been relieved of the transactional burden of the business and freed up our ability to focus on the delivery of programs or the delivery of support or the strategy that aligns with what the company's trying to achieve. We've been much more able to focus on what's the talent strategy that enables the business strategy, which has improved our delivery capability, and the technology is at a point where it's tunable to the delivery need and so it can morph more easily as the business strategy needs to morph. I think that's been the biggest.



I also think the technology's enabled new innovations. Everybody talks about Laszlo Bock's work at Google. I think at the end of the day, he will be the Billy Dean of HR, the guy who brought...

Dave: Right, Money Ball, right.

Russ: Yeah, the Money Ball to the HR profession. What he's been able to do is kind of quantitatively assess attributes of management that make sense, that is much, much more ... Technology's enabled the generation of much more data. The data has been able to be configured in ways that we didn't have access to before. We knew at Nervewire what educational experience, job assignments and managers contributed to our top performing consultants, because we were able to look at data across all the different stacks of HR data that you just didn't collect before or didn't have access to. I think it's freed us from the administrative tasks, and it's enabled new innovation.

Dave: And outsourced more things to suppliers, too, there's more benefit providers that you'd use to have to do a lot of that work, payroll and all those things is now done by third parties often.

Russ: Right. Again, once you have the data on a particular process or capability you can make a determination relative to your strategy about whether that should be insourced or outsourced. When I joined iRobot, we had an outsourced RPO that did all our recruiting, which made sense for where the company was at the time. When our strategy moved to a consumer branding strategy it was clear that we had to bring that capability in house so that we could sell our own story and our own brand, and we're able to do it because the provider the RPO was able to give us the data about how they worked and how the processes were executed and what worked and what didn't work, and we could easily convert that to an in house, and then elevate it for what we wanted to happen.

Dave: We come to the part of the podcast where we ask the Northeast Human Resources Association question of the podcast, the NEHRA question.

Russ: Good. I've been waiting.

Dave: What things would you recommend to young professionals looking to move into HR, move up in HR, somebody trying to make a name for themselves in this function? While you're thinking about that question, and this is a similar way to get at it, in fact I got this question from Beth Grous when she answered, if you could write a letter to your 30-year-old self, giving yourself advice about your career, what would it be? Another way to get at that same content.

Russ: I would answer those two things differently.

Dave: You can do that. It can be two answers if you want.

Russ: What would I tell you professionally, I'd say that you've joined a profession at a time when you can decide to leave your mark on the profession, that you should look at it as an opportunity not just to have a great career but to actually have an influence on the direction of the profession. Things to pay



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attention to while you join the profession, for reasons that probably had something to do with the work of HR, understand the work of the company that you're involved in, that the translation that the best HR people I know, know how to make how to connect their activities and HR programs to helping the organization succeed in what, in their business strategy, that there's that you don't do something because you read about it and it looked like the right thing to do or the cool thing to do. Make a case for it working within the context of the business and how it helps the company execute its strategy, so understand the business that you're working in.

Know your domain, I'd say, is the second thing. The profession has lots of areas to it. Just because you have a benefits department doesn't mean you shouldn't know the benefits if you're a generalist. If you're a generalist, you should be able to know, you should be able to talk to your customers about the vesting schedule for the 401K matches, or what the plan deductibles are in your PPO, or your consumer driven health plan, and why one is better than the other. It's important to understand the whole aspect of the profession, the whole aspect of the business. You're not going to be playing in it all the time, but it's important for your own competency and your own ability to be able to stand up in front of your ... Your customer doesn't really care how HR is organized, they care that the person in front of them is capable of answering their questions. I'd tell you to become a student of the other elements of the profession.

I'd say the third thing that I'd encourage folks to do is enjoy solving problems. It's what got me interested in the profession in the beginning. You got to like being a problem solver, which means you got to be comfortable confronting problems, and understanding the motivations for the people who have them, because problem solving is what we do better than pretty much any other organization. When I say better, because the variables in our work are often...

Dave: You're talking about iRobot or HR?

Russ: HR.

Dave: Okay.

Russ: The variables at our work, HR's work, really are about people, and people don't look like spreadsheets.

Dave: There's nothing more complex.

Russ: It's not only complex, it's the same issue is going to have different variables every time because of the differences of people involved. That's both that's both the great part of the job is the joy of the job, it's also the competency that you have to bring, which is why I say problem solving. Whether you have a problem-solving model that you like or emphasis in your career, understanding ways in which issues are mediated, spend time to understand it.



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Finally, many folks like working with people, and I think that's great, and you definitely need to have that, but I take it a step further as a professional in HR. Understand that the one of the best courses I took early in my career was an influencing skills course. It talked about it helped me bring together the elements of my interpersonal abilities to help understand how I could influence what different strategies at different times. I'd say that understanding what your interpersonal strengths are and what your weaknesses are and refining those weaknesses so that you have a repertoire of responses from an interpersonal standpoint that help you be better at your work is something that I wish I had done earlier. Those are understand the business that what you're operating, understand your domain really well, love problem solving, and think about it from a problem solving model standpoint, and develop an interpersonal repertoire including listening skills that helps you execute your work. That's what I would tell young folks.

Dave: Is that your answer to that other question about what would you write to your 30-year-old self about the influencing skills, or is there something else that comes to mind if you could get to your 30-year-old self a message?

Russ: Well, it was only five years ago, so it's ... <laughter>...Why's that so funny? I was really impatient, and probably pretty arrogant, and I would have told myself to be more patient, and to learn from more people. I think the thing that I've learned in this career is that these jobs are really hard, and that difficulty doesn't change. As a matter of fact, in some ways I think it increases. The top jobs tend to be really hard jobs, and I'm not saying that the entry level jobs aren't hard either, they are hard, it's a hard profession. It's not a profession for the feint of heart.

The skills, things I just talked about, have to fit on top of a sense of confidence that you can figure it out. You might not always have the answer, and rarely do I in the moment, but I think that what I've learned that what I would say to that person is reach out. What I would tell myself is I have had a mentor since then, I've had coaches since then, I take counsel from wherever I can get it. Matter of fact I'm somewhat disappointed that there's not a distinct segment of the coaching market that's focused on HR execs and HR people, because I do think the challenges ...

Dave: I'll make a note of that.

Russ: Yeah, me too. Because I do think that the challenges are unique. I worked in different ways for about 20 CEOs, and one of the things that's consistent about them is those are lonely jobs because there's not really many people to talk to.

Dave: As the head of HR in those jobs, or the CEO?

Russ: The CEO job is that way.

Dave: But also the HR job is too.



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Russ: That's the insight jump I was making. The head of HR job is also a fairly lonely job, in that your peers are focused on other things. There's P&L, there's accounting, there's finance, there's operations, and so the kind of challenges that we have in reconciling policy or making a case for a need for a community and the company to add to the way accounting works, to add to the expense base to enable the retention of talent requires some intellect, some logic, some cleverness which are available, but not easy to talk about.

I think I would tell my 30-year-old self to be more patient, to be more open, that the ideas that feel so right and clear may have another perspective if you kind of broaden your view. Don't be afraid to ask for help because the success, the most successful people that I had the joy of meeting a lot of really successful HR people, and that's probably the reason I love our profession, the most successful folks are the folks who are not afraid of asking for help. I think that's what I would tell my 30-year-old self.

Dave: Who have been some key influences on you?

Russ: That's a great question. I think I try to learn from everybody, I try to learn from everything. I think there have been people in my life, I had a coach for ten years which just basically said that I didn't learn the first year and I kept coming back to try to make sure I learned, that really helped shaped me professionally then as an HR person. He imparted something a wisdom on me that I'll share, which is for me as a young HR person who is prone to perhaps following the easier path versus the harder path, he said to me as an old Chinese wisdom that says if you measure your success by the amount of praise or criticism you receive your anxiety will be endless, so Barry was, it was Barry Cohen, that I still see, was a tremendous influence on my life.

I've worked for a couple of CEOs who've been huge influences on my life, three or four of them helped me learn different things. Jim Manzi helped me understand that just because it's been this way doesn't mean it always needs to be this way, and you have to have the courage of your convictions. Kirk Arnold taught me about the power of culture and the importance of talent and the execution of business strategies. Bob Weiler taught me that to create a great workplace you have to create great teams. Colin Angle, who I work for now, he's an entrepreneur CEO, he's been in a different job everyday in his 27 years at iRobot, and he refuses to take the easy path, even now when he'd have every right to. He sees disagreements as the beginning of opportunity for innovation. He sees misunderstanding as the chance for clarity. He's fearless.

Dave: That's been a theme of your career, really, right? You've been that person and been around those people.

Russ: Yeah, which has helped me prepare for situations. I've had like I found myself in some pretty interesting places in my career, privileged to have people like the folks I just rattled off for you to be there for guides. So those are some of the key influences I'd say.

Dave: I got a couple silly questions for you.



Russ: Go, yeah.

Dave: What's the first thing you do when you get out of bed in the morning?

Russ: I exercise. I get up at 4:30, and I stretch, I run a mile and a half, two miles, I lift a few weights, then I get the kids up, breakfast on the table, dishwasher emptied, showered and off to work.

Dave: Geeze, that is impressive. That's good advice right there.

Russ: I'm not sure, it's the fine line between wisdom and lunacy, right?

Dave: What gives you energy, Russ?

Russ: I get my energy, this is going to sound trite but it's true for me. I get so much energy from my work. I have been blessed to be in a profession that I love. I had the honor of working for some incredible organizations. My dad used to say you should pray for being lucky rather than good, and I feel like I've been lucky to have really had some unbelievably great assignments. Not easy, at all, but great assignments I've learned from.

I get to work with people, and that's just energizing for me. If I have a bad period of time, I run down to the engineering room, or I go visit the team in Pasadena, or I go to London and that's where you can see that all the work applies and has value. I get I love the work. I love the profession and have been really honored to be a part of it.

Dave: Yeah, that comes through. Russ, I really appreciate you taking the time to be on the podcast. We look forward to talking soon.

Russ: Thank you.

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