



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 the 2022 season of The Hennessy Report by Keystone Partners. I'm Dave Hennessy and today's guest is the senior vice president of people at Catalant, Amy Knapp. Amy and I go way back. We met each other as we were both starting our human resources careers over two decades ago and it's been so exciting to watch her career growth which took her to the Silicon Valley and working in the VC world. Amazing journey through talent acquisition and culture building. And she's doing it again at Catalant now, has a very exciting talent story themselves. Next up on the podcast is a friend of Amy's and mine. Piper Sheer, chief people officer at AEW. And now our conversation with Amy Knapp.

Amy, welcome to the podcast.

Amy Knapp: Thank you, David. It's so nice to be here. It's great to see you today.

Dave: It's funny, we started our careers in HR at almost exactly the same time. I remember meeting you at the Human Resources Council with Anne Couturier. She was the head of HR of the division of Rainin in Woburn, Stoneham area and we used to go to those rubber chicken dinners at the Cambridge area. And we stayed in touch and I remember tracking your progress. It brought you out to Silicon Valley and you ended up doing all sorts of amazing things. I think you worked in the VC world and then came back as a chief people officer. I was like, wow, look at Amy. What an amazing career growth. And I thought it'd be good just for you to share a little bit about that journey. What brought you out there and what are the things that you learned in the Silicon Valley that have really made a big impact on your career?

Amy: Yeah, that is wild that it is 20 years ago. So that was 2001.

Dave: Exactly.

Amy: Which is weird, but because I still feel like I graduated high school like 10 years ago. So like how that's possible. That was a wild journey. So Rainin Instrument, that's where we met. It was a manufacturing company and that's the company that actually moved me out to California. They built this huge global headquarters in Oakland and I thought I'll give it a year. They asked to move me out there and if I don't like it, I can always come back. And I ended up staying 13 years and I loved it and it was great. I stayed in California for 13 years, not at Rainin. I am a girl that was never into taking risks at all. And I would be homesick thinking about being an hour away, going camping or whatever.

To go 3,000 miles away for a job, surprised everybody in my life. But it paid off and I left the manufacturing world and went into tech because it's such a Mecca out there for software tech and I had been in manufacturing and I went to drug delivery and pharmaceuticals and I just kept growing in these HR representative and HR generalist roles and becoming a business partner. And then I fell into recruiting and had to do a lot of recruiting and I loved recruiting and I hadn't really had to do that before.



Dave: What'd you love about recruiting? Curious.

Amy: I love just going out and telling the story over and over again about why, what it is that we're doing and connecting the dots for people and just finding that right match and just digging in and getting to know people.

I mean, I get energized from meeting people and so it allowed me the opportunity to do that and help them and just connect the dots between what it is that they really value and where they want to go and to the story that we're doing and what we're building. And I got energized about, and I loved it. And then I got recruited to go to Google to recruit for HR people. And so, I felt like this is such an interesting blend because I'm still in my wheelhouse of HR and I hired HR and benefits folks. I was there in a contract role for a year. I loved it. I mean, at the time there was 20,000 people at the company. It has doubled probably in size. But that was my entry into tech. Even though I only focused on HR and benefits. And so, I solely grew up as a recruiter there. And then I met somebody through a book club. I said, "Hey, I'm looking for something new." And she's like, "Well I know the founder of this tech startup, who's looking for a recruiter. Are you interested?" And I said, "Sure."

Dave: Now you're getting really taking risks all the time now. First it was, should I leave Boston? Now I'm like, I'll leave Google and go anywhere. Now you're an old hat at risk taking.

Amy: Exactly, yeah. But I do think it's so interesting when people say, how do I approach my job search? And I'm like, you will never know when opportunities will come up. If you are in an active job search, tell people and tell people what it is that you're looking for, what you're not looking for because you never know who's going to know somebody. I told somebody at a book club meeting and it brought me into a tech startup called Ning and at the time it had raised over a hundred million dollars. It was co-founded by Marc Andreessen and Gina Bianchini. So it had a female founder. It was a platform where you could build your social network for anything. We're in the heart of Palo Alto and it was really exciting. I joined when we were about 30 people as the first recruiter and I learned tech recruiting at that point. I was there for four years.

And for the first two years, I had to hire my boss and we built this huge recruiting engine and we saw the company triple in size. And it was really, really exciting. That was in like 2008 to 2010, we built such a great technical brand. But on the other side of it, we were losing people. We had a 40% attrition rate and we didn't have a huge focus on HR at the company. And so, my light bulb goes off and I'm like, we're just missing a huge opportunity here because it doesn't matter the strong recruiting brand that we're building in this engine because we're just losing people. And so, we had a CEO change and I went to the new CEO and I said, my background before recruiting is in HR and I'd love to focus on this here because I think like there's a big opportunity miss.

And he was like, that sounds great. Why don't you move on over and run HR for us as an HR manager? And I was like, okay, great. And I had all these like hopes and dreams and plans. And a week later we laid off 65% of the company. All the recruiting team. I stayed at the company and then we had a product direction change. And so, in a six week period you go from CEO change, product direction change, and a layoff. And I'm like, what the heck? Just that. But the last two years at that company, I feel like I really



grew up because I was at this company that was still in the heart of Silicon Valley that you had to compete with at the Facebooks and the LinkedIn and Amazon and Google and really think about why do people want to come to your company, especially when you went through a major, major brand hit.

And it was just me in people. And so, I had now this holistic role where I would look at the entire employee experience or a journey where you're thinking about building the people programs, which I look at as the product that as a recruiter, you go out and market. And it was acquired by a company and then I moved on to a larger company called Chegg, which was going through another transitional period where they had just acquired six companies in an 18 month period. And I had come in and we were about 600 people or so. And it was shifting from being a textbook rental company into a digital hub for all your educational needs. And I joined there and really rebuilt the recruiting team and I led talent acquisition in almost three years that I was there. We hired 300 people, built a recruiting engine and we were in this place called Santa Clara, which is still in Silicon valley but off the beaten path, not on the public transportation route.

It was a lot of work to get the story out there about why do you want to come to us instead of it being in San Francisco and working for Facebook or Google. And so, you had to get really good at leveraging the talent in house that you have leveraging the messaging the brand and getting out there to woo talent in. And so that was a really exciting experience. And then I was recruited out to a venture firm called Redpoint. They had just raised another fund and were looking for how do we support our early stage founders in a more hands on and meaningful way besides giving them millions of dollars. And they hired on a head of marketing and a head of talent. And I thought, what unique way to use my experience?

I'd known people in these roles at different venture firms, but they don't come up as often. And I said, I'll give it a year and if it doesn't work out, I can probably go back in house to a company to run talent or people. And I stayed five and a half years. It was a greenfield opportunity. They really liked my background that I had the blend of HR and talent and I'd been in operational roles. So I could relate very closely with the founders that they were investing in and really help founders think through how do you build your talent and your people strategy at such an early stage. Being a series A, series B company and with no brand out there and having to scale pretty quickly and going through different stages of scale. And me being in companies as a first recruiter, having to do that, and then being at a company that scaled through IPO and then seeing how a machine did, even though I had a smaller role at Google. But it was a really interesting way to leverage my background and experience, which I'm grateful for.

Dave: Amazing. What a whirlwind of different experiences that you had over that period of time. In almost 20 years out in the Silicon Valley area. What else about the Silicon Valley for people that haven't worked there, especially in the times that you were there, where things were really booming, of course. What's different about Silicon Valley?

Amy: The landscape for talent and people tech is so saturated. There's everything from sourcing to doing background checks to references to HRAS to payroll benefits, assessment, performance, development, engagement. So, it's like the whole landscape has just grown so much. And I think Silicon Valley, so much of it is formed there, that you get an earlier look at a lot of the products, and you start using a lot of them to help. At the tech startups that I worked with, you just have to learn to move really,



really fast. And founders also have to be really, really great at recruiting. I say, if you don't like recruiting, you should not start a company because like, as a founder, and even as a founder of a later stage company, you still should be out there actively recruiting all the time.

I just learned so much being in house at companies. And then when I was in the venture firm, at Redpoint, it was amazing to see how, from a board's perspective, what the investors and your board actually really look at, and it all comes down to talent. I mean, you have to have a really good product market fit and product roadmap and everything, but thinking about it, you would never go forward with a company without a product roadmap, right, or a strategy around that. You should never do that without a people roadmap, either and a people strategy. And over the years, I've seen a huge shift where founders bring in a people leader earlier now than they used to even five and a half years ago. I hate the phrase war on talent, but it was so competitive. And you have to also balance it with being thoughtful and strategic and how you're doing it and it never ends. As soon as you recruit somebody, you have to re-recruit them all the time as an employee.

Dave: Great training ground for you. And it makes sense why Catalant was very interested in your background. Not only from running the people side of their business, but also what the business model is. Could you tell us a little bit about Catalant?

Amy: Sure. We moved back to the east coast and I worked remotely for Redpoint so I had to fly back west a lot. Spent about every three or four weeks in San Francisco. And I love still being tied to Silicon valley and doing the work out there with the companies that I was working with. But in 2019 I did 18 trips and it was a lot. It was too much to be traveling across country every few weeks and not being around with my kids as often. And so, I talked with a number of founders and a number of startups and like I said before, I get connected with people really, really quick. I mean, I optimize for team first. But I also like the product. So Catalant has a talent marketplace that allowed companies getting connected with high end consultants and freelance labor.

And that has grown to be a marketplace of over 70,000 experts. And experts can either be an individual consultant or a smaller boutique firm. There are companies that are large that have been using us for years like DuPont and Shell and Anheuser-Busch. And they leverage the marketplace to be able to bring these senior subject matter experts to come in and work on highly mission critical work. We want to be here as an extension of a company's workforce planning and not only be available for these transactional moments in time where somebody needs a high end consultant to come on in and work on something. It's like, as you're thinking about your future growth and where you plan your workforce to be, over the next couple of years, how can we be a part of that where you can flex in and out of this marketplace to find the right talent? You don't always have to go ahead and find a full-time hire.

That really interested me. What also interested me is that they had grown a ton and focused a lot on recruiting and not as much on the HR and people building. And so, even though when I joined the company, it was 240 people. We were going to be scaling by a lot more. There's still a lot of building to do. And I love to build. I love to be able to come on in and figure out what's going to be the right thing for this company and figure out how do we scale it. And so, it definitely wasn't in maintenance mode,



but we were far enough along where we had a lot of foundation, good brand and a good product that I could get behind. And so, I made the decision to join the team in February of last year.

Dave: Yeah. That timing's pretty interesting, Amy. In fact, I think I saw you right around that time. And then I think something happened. I can't remember but the world changed quite a bit. Yeah.

Amy: I don't know. I'll figure it out by the end of this podcast.

Dave: Yeah. But before we talk about that though, can you talk a little bit more about the actual talent that you're helping deploy inside organizations? Is it strategy consultants, like the kind of people that might work at BCG or McKinsey that kind of talent? Okay.

Amy: That's exactly the type of talent. Exactly, but we wouldn't be as expensive and you'd be able to get through meeting these people, getting matched up and connected with them at a faster clip as well. And they are across different functions, but we have a lot of experts that do help when a company is going through making a digital transformation move, or they're thinking about, we need research and data around thinking about our M&A activity, which could end up being multimillion dollar projects that people are working on. And so, they need somebody that has this really senior level of experience to be able to come on in and help drive that, drive what they need and execute what their strategy is. So you see different functions across the org. I leveraged it myself when looking for recruiting help to go in. So there's a lot of HR and organizational design and comp consultants in there. There are small recruiting boutique firms in there as well. People in a PMO office, or more strategic leadership roles to be able to help project manage strategic initiative at a company.

Dave: So it's not only just matching individuals. Sometimes you match a group of people. Interesting. You described it to me when you joined the firm, but I haven't heard of this type of business model out there too much. So it's fascinating. All right, so you set the stage for us. So you went through quite a bit though, obviously like everybody. So tell us a little bit about the roller coaster ride of the pandemic and what you had to do and what are the biggest challenges from your standpoint? What were they and where are you now?

Amy: I was putting together a people a roadmap with my HR team and the next day we had to plan a trial work from home day and then we never came back. And so it was all of a sudden shifting this company to being entirely distributed and remote when it was a very much of an in-person culture. And we also have many people who were earlier in their careers. So this is the first time, not that anybody had gone through a pandemic before, but this is the first time that many of them had gone through a major change. How do we make this successful for people? How do we support you? And then having our business being hit as well because at the time customers were pulling out saying any budget we had for consultants, freelancers we're freezing it all. And so, our business took a huge dive.

We had to go ahead organize a RIF, which was really unfortunate. So from my standpoint, leading a company through that in the first six weeks and being there not having a ton of context about the people either. So I couldn't even opine on that. That was definitely challenging. And then my team was impacted as well because we froze our hiring. And then we spent a ton of time after that, like probably



for a good six months, figuring out how do we support our employees and partnering with our managers and really partnering them individually on how do you even set micro deliverables and then give feedback a week later? Because people had some structure and clarity on what are they supposed to be doing? We also had a lot of people structure and rigor that we still had to do. How we pay people and nobody knew how to get promoted here or why people get raises or how, or when. There was very limited feedback and growth conversations happening or performance management.

And so, we ended up rolling out some of these programs all in the middle of last year, but we had to do it in a really lightweight way where the company could absorb it because there were so many stressors. I mean, and then you throw in systemic racism coming and racial violence and inequities coming and that comes to the surface in the company and not being a very diverse company, but has a lot of passionate employees who bring it up that gave us the opportunity to really think through how do we build that into what we're building now. And then we had a reorganization where we shifted our company into two different lines of businesses. And then we went through a second RIF in the fall to right size after that reorganization. And so, you go through two layoffs in a year, that in a normal year is stressful.

We went from two CEOs to one CEO and we also had some of the other leadership changes. So it's been a heck of a ride for sure.

Dave: Yeah.

Amy: Halfway through the year, customers started coming back and they were realizing that this is actually a perfect time to be leveraging a talent marketplace like this because number one, we don't know what our full-time needs are going to be, but we still have really important work that needs to get done. And we need really senior level people to come on in and help us fulfill these needs. And we can hire them anywhere because everybody's remote. And they leaned-in heavily to the marketplace. And for the last three quarters, we've had record breaking quarters...

Dave: Wow.

Amy: ...which is bonkers.

Dave: You had two layoffs and now your record breaking quarters. So that's amazing. So how did you maintain rebuild trust with the employees during the two reductions and a lot of change going on?

Amy: You have to over communicate even, and just being super open and transparent all the way down to the company, to the lower levels. We did a lot as a leadership team talking about what decisions are being made and why they're being made. You go through this whole cascade of this is at the company level and then you put it down to our senior leadership team and then our managers, and then managers are quick with the right information and FAQs and scripts even, just to be able to help them be able to answer questions from their employees.

And then even getting down to team level and then individual level to making sure that, do you understand what happened? And we talk about the good and the bad, talk about what mistakes were



made and own up to them. You show vulnerability, you definitely want to make sure that you have confidence in the decisions that you make, but allowing them to see what's going on under the hood. A great thing that we did last year too, is we did a number of surveys with people, asked a lot about what support do you need? What else do you need to know that we haven't answered? Or how can we better explain things? And people gave real feedback and we listened. They don't mind doing a survey. They don't mind asking the questions because they know that we're going to come back with an answer. If they feel that it comes from an authentic place they'll stick with you, hopefully.

Dave: Right. What are some of the unwritten rules about the way people work at Catalant, Amy? Give us a sense of the culture.

Amy: Most of the time I've been here, we've all been distributed and remote. But what I've learned, we hire well, we respect each other, we listen to each other, people care about each other. One of our cultural values is, be a force multiplier, lift other people up, be collaborative, gain the trust of each other. We had a ton of engagement on Slack and you can just see people sharing stories. Then if they feel safe enough that they can share a story about how they've experienced racism in their own life or somebody sharing a story about what it means to her to celebrate Loving Day because she's Caucasian and her husband's African American. And if you feel safe enough to be able to share that type of vulnerable parts of you and your personal life with a team at work, that's something good that's happening there.

Dave: It sounds like you've made some progress in DEIB. You just gave a couple examples. Are there any lessons learned with your journey in that regard or advice to others that are trying to improve how diverse and inclusive their organization is?

Amy: Last year what happened in society and it just brought it to the forefront, right. Brought it to the surface. And I think that many people were very vocal and very passionate about, we have to do this now, we have to do this now, we have to be making these statements and must be making these donations and must be making all of this about this moment. And as a leadership team, we didn't want it to be about one moment. We also wanted to be authentic. We focused on inclusion at first. Because number one, we also weren't hiring people and we can't just come out and make all these statements. If we're actually not taking an inward look and figure out how to build the right programs that are inclusive and that are supportive and that are equitable for our current team, if we don't even understand who our current makeup is as they self-identify.

And then we have to take the time to really think about where are there gaps. And if we're not doing that, then we don't have any business trying to attract all these people, but we're not building a right environment or a culture to support them when they get here. We've built an inclusion diversity council, we had an inclusion audit. We put all of our executives, our people team, our people managers and that council through inclusion training because we're the people that are building the systems around, how do we hire people and promote and reward and recognize folks. And so, it's a journey, it's a process.

Dave: And what are you excited about in the next chapter of people strategy at Catalant?



Amy: I don't like the statement of the new normal. But I it's like, I think we just have to figure out what's the right way for us. We did very well when we're all in office and we did very well when we're all remote. But now we're shifting and evolving as a hybrid workforce and that's a learning curve for us. But I love this challenge, really being able to figure out how do we build the right programs, processes or systems that will allow people to continue to grow and be engaged and be proud to work here.

Dave: We produced this podcast Keystone in cooperation with NEHRA, the Northeast Human Resources Association and we have Meghan Mandino. She's our producer of the podcast and also part of NEHRA's Emerging HR Professionals group. And she has the NEHRA question for you.

Meghan Mandino: Hi Amy, how would you advise an emerging HR leader with big ideas around innovation on approaching their company's leadership to see some of those ideas through?

Amy: We do ourselves so much benefit by coming prepared with the data that will support this. And I think that over time, HR people have not been looked at as being a resource for data in programs. And I think that the stronger or the faster or the quicker that we show you have business acumen. So you understand what it's going to mean for the business, right. And maybe where there are gaps in the business, what the potential ROI is or what you've learned about this and where it's spring-boarded companies or teams before by focusing in this area, you're going to capture a lot of people's attention quicker.

Meghan: So, for someone who's just getting starting in HR, are there any resources that you would recommend in looking into the data like that?

Amy: Start earlier, building out a strong network of peers. I wouldn't have been able to get through the last 15 months without my network of peers and sharing. This is what I'm looking to do. Have you done this before? How are you approaching it and really learning from each other. Learn more about the business through people within the company. Almost do it as a focus group and figuring out this is what we're thinking of. Talk to me about how this would impact you if we did something like this or would something like this be interesting? Looking at resources like I'm a member of NEHRA out here, which has brought me closer to a lot of peers in this area, which is great. I'm also part of a People Tech Partners, which is a group of people leaders as well as CPOHQ, which is also an online network. And then just continue to foster those connections that you're making.

Dave: If you could write a letter of career advice, professional advice to your 30 year old self. What would you write?

Amy: Don't worry so much. I've just spent so much of my time worrying. Everything is figure-out-able. Seriously, don't worry so much. Just relax.

Dave: What do you want to make sure you don't regret 10 years from now?



Amy: I want to make sure that I don't regret any of the career decisions I made but more importantly, I want to make sure that I don't disappoint my children, that I spend time with them and that my kids are proud of me and that I'm able to be a really present mother to them.

Dave: What's something interesting about you we don't see in your LinkedIn profile that you're willing to share.

Amy: I'm a really, really awesome bowler.

Dave: Wow, that is interesting.

Amy: My highest score was 291. I'm an awesome bowler.

Dave: Wow. That's only nine pins from the perfect score. Wow. That's amazing.

Amy: Yeah. So there's that. I don't know what that'll get me, but there's that, so.

Dave: Your favorite performance to watch live.

Amy: Oh, that would have to be a Bruins game. Anyway, I'm still a little bit in depression mode right now that we're out of...

Dave: Tough ending to the season. I agree.

Amy: We've gone and seen them on the road. We've done road trips across the country, up to Canada and have seen them in nine other markets so far. And our goal is to see them in every away stadium. Our love is also road trips as a family. And so, we have two kids and the four of us blend our road trips and our Bruins games.

Dave: I imagine you stop at some bowling alleys.

Amy: Yes, definitely, they're everywhere, right? Yeah.

Dave: Amy, it's been so great having you on the podcast.

Amy: You as well. Thanks so much for having me.

Dave: You're very welcome.

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