

Unlocking True Human Potential

An Interview with Ellyn Shook, Chief Leadership & Human Resources Officer, Accenture

EDITORS' NOTE *Ellyn Shook is responsible for helping the more than half a million people of Accenture succeed both professionally and personally. A member of Accenture's Global Management Committee and Investment Committee, Shook is a strong advocate for inclusion and diversity and Accenture has been widely-recognized externally as an employer of choice and for its diversity efforts. A recognized thought leader and author on the topics of future of work and inclusion*



Ellyn Shook

and diversity, Shook is a member of the World Economic Forum's Global Shapers Community Foundation Board, the Women's Leadership Board of the Women and Public Policy program at Harvard's Kennedy School, and the steering committee of Paradigm for Parity. She also serves on the HR Policy Association's Board of Directors and is an active member of the HR50 division of World50. Shook holds a BS degree from Purdue University.

COMPANY BRIEF *Accenture (accenture.com) is a global professional services company with leading capabilities in digital, cloud and security. Combining unmatched experience and specialized skills across more than 40 industries, it offers Strategy and Consulting, Interactive, Technology and Operations services – all powered by the world's largest network of Advanced Technology and Intelligent Operations centers. Accenture's 537,000 people deliver on the promise of technology and human ingenuity every day, serving clients in more than 120 countries. Accenture embraces the power of change to create value and shared success for clients, people, shareholders, partners and communities.*

With the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, along with the pace of change accelerating, how is the role of the CHRO evolving?

The pandemic immediately caused deep disruption of talent markets around the world, disproportionately impacting women and under-represented populations of people. It also massively accelerated the pace of change – digital transformations that previously took years happened in months, which created a chasm between two types of companies: the leaders and lagards. Additionally, the compounding physical and mental health,

financial and societal crises required employers to see their people not just as employees, but as whole human beings – perhaps in ways they never had before. As a result of these changes, the CHRO's role also changed dramatically.

For those experiencing massive employment disruption – either historic unemployment or in some cases the inability to hire fast enough – modern CHROs need to balance obligations to their organization, their people and society more broadly.

They must treat people with the utmost respect and consider both the short and long-term needs of their workforce along with the vibrancy of their talent brand. They also need to collaborate in new and different ways, often across industries and even with competitors, to find new opportunities for their people or to fill roles in surging industries.

Those companies that are accelerating their digital transformations also need to identify new capabilities, operating models and leadership characteristics. Many organizations look to their CHRO to orchestrate this transformation through leadership, talent and cultural lenses.

Those who understand and focus on human needs are best positioned to emerge faster with stronger talent brands and employee value propositions. We refer to this in our research as leaving people “net better off,” which is also good for business. Modern CHROs play a critical role in accelerating transformation and caring for their people, ultimately positioning their

company to be true winners in the race for talent and for market leadership.

Will you expand on the concept of leaving people “net better off,” and what actions CHROs and their peers in the C-suite should be focused on?

This past year David Rodriguez, CHRO of Marriott, and I co-authored research on this topic, and a clear message to the C-suite emerged. As the pandemic passes, people will again have a choice in who to work for – we are seeing signs of this with talent shortages in many sectors. Savvy leaders recognize that building trust and helping their people become what we call “net better off” will win in the future. Our research found six key human dimensions that contribute most to leaving people “net better off” at work, and unlocking over two-thirds of an individual's potential. There are the obvious ones: providing a job and a paycheck, and meeting their physical needs, which have been amplified throughout the pandemic. But many companies stop there. It's the other three dimensions that matter most to help people fulfill their potential: providing a sense of purpose, meeting their relational needs and sense of connection to others, and supporting their emotional and mental well-being.

When leaders fail to look across all six dimensions, they leave opportunity on the table. When organizations leave their people “net better off,” our modeling shows they also see a boost in financial performance, even in challenging economic times. Again, taking good care of people is good business.

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Taking care of people also implies an inclusive workplace. How engrained is diversity and inclusion in Accenture’s culture and values?

At Accenture, the tone is set at the top. The activations and ideas across any company need to start with true business commitment. Our CEO and our Board of Directors set the tone for our inclusion and diversity approach which is grounded in two fundamental beliefs. First, that equality, inclusion and diversity make us smarter and more innovative. Second is our shared success mindset – embracing change that benefits all our stakeholders: our people, clients, shareholders, partners and communities.

People, culture and inclusion and diversity are topics at every board meeting. We are very intentional about creating a culture of equality that’s underpinned by four cultural building blocks – our beliefs, behaviors, how we develop people and how we do business. Having a strong cultural grounding is so important because it helps organizations move beyond episodic reactions to creating sustainable and equitable change.

In a talent-led business like ours, this translates into the commitment we make to our people to help them be successful, both professionally and personally. At the heart of this is a fundamental belief that we treat our people as human beings, not just employees, so they can bring their authentic self to work – and to their entire life – every day. That is how you unlock true human potential.

How important is it to have diverse perspectives and experiences at the table when addressing client needs?

Our commitment also extends beyond the walls of Accenture to create what we call 360-degree value. We aim to not only deliver the financial business case, but also to partner with our clients to make greater progress on inclusion and diversity through diverse teams, help them achieve their sustainability goals, and enable them to reskill and create meaningful experiences for their people. A great example is our client Best Buy. As part of our collaboration, we are helping them not only accelerate technology innovation – they are already a leader – but also diverse talent. The company has an ambitious goal to hire 1,000 employees onto its digital and technology team over the next two years, and it has committed that 30 percent

of these employees will be diverse – specifically Black, Latinx, Indigenous and women. Accenture will help recruit, train and hire this new talent.

Our research shows that equality helps to drive innovation. A person’s innovation mindset – their willingness and ability to innovate – is six times greater in organizations that foster a more equal culture. Our clients expect that we’ll bring this innovation to the work we do with them, and we all recognize we will make greater progress together than we will alone.

This also comes to life in how we collaborate with our partners to create lasting impact in our communities. For example, we recently named our 2021 Outside Counsel Diversity Award winners. For the past few years, we had recognized the general contributions of outside counsel firms. To help spark meaningful change in the industry, the awards now honor select legal service partners who go above and beyond to create a culture of equality in their workplaces and communities.

Ultimately, the world is watching – from employees and customers to partners, community members and investors – and expectations are growing. It’s not just about creating value; it’s about creating value while leading with values. Leaders are taking a hard look in the mirror and realizing that, while the journey toward equality is complex and making enduring progress can be difficult, the true risk is not to do something, but to do nothing.

Will you elaborate on some of the actions Accenture is taking to achieve progress and reach a diverse talent pool?

We have found that, as with any other business effort, the first step toward creating a more inclusive and diverse workforce is almost an obvious one: setting goals. Transparency builds trust, and publishing our goals and our progress not only holds us to a higher level of accountability, it can also accelerate the pace of change.

In 2017, we published our goal to become a gender-balanced workforce by 2025, which we are on track to achieve; we are at over 46 percent women today. And, while we had set representation goals for a number of years, in 2020 we created our own methodology for race and ethnicity representation goals in the U.S., U.K. and South Africa. This additional rigor gave us the confidence to be even more aspirational

and to share these goals publicly. We combine this with complementary actions that foster a company culture of equality – one that truly supports the people that the goals represent.

To expand our access to a diverse talent pool, we adopted a skills-based approach and looked beyond four-year degree requirements. Currently, 48 percent of our roles in the U.S. no longer have this degree requirement. Considering our representation goals and census data, we were able to target select metro areas where we could accelerate progress and make a difference in those communities.

Once goals are in place, leaders must be held accountable for reaching them. We created what we call a “shared success scorecard,” which measures our top 500 leaders across five key dimensions: sales, revenue and profitability, as well as key talent retention and progress on inclusion and diversity goals. Putting people metrics on par with financial metrics is a game changer.

What other advice do you have for organizations to accelerate their progress in addition to setting goals?

Goals and numbers tell only part of the story. Leaders need to listen and understand how their people are feeling. After the murder of Philando Castile in 2016, we brought the topic of race into the workplace with our first Building Bridges conversation, allowing us to have courageous discussions with each other. This became our formula for convening conversations.

Without open dialogue, the risk of creating an atmosphere of “divisive diversity” is very real – which happens when you focus on the numbers without real cultural change. When you foster an environment where real ideas and perspectives can be shared, it’s through that exchange when inclusion happens. Being able to face uncomfortable truths, and discuss critical topics openly, make up the hard work that matters most.

Organizations also need to be laser-focused on creating a culture that supports sustainable change. They should ask themselves some key questions, including: Are we actively listening to our people and holding open conversations about equality? Can people see others like themselves in our workplace? Once people join us, are our development and advancement paths helping them succeed? ●