

AT THE EDGE PODCAST



SEASON 2, EPISODE 5

BRIDGETTE WILDER – Hybrid Work in Higher Education

Interviewed by Michael Lee

Bridgette Wilder is Vice President and Chief Human Resources Officer at the California Institute of the Arts since June 2021. Prior to her appointment at CalArts, she served the Albany State University in the role of CHRO, and before that in the dual role of Equity, Diversity, Inclusion & Safety Officer/Senior Manager at the City of Memphis. Additionally, she has served as the Chief Human Resources Officer for Media Fusion; Deputy Director of Human Resources/Chief Diversity Officer at The Citadel, Military College of South Carolina. She was the first African American Deputy Director and the only person to hold the dual role; an Employee Relations Representative & Corporate Trainer for Airborne Express; Manager of Recruitment & Training at INROADS, Inc. in Richmond, VA.; Market Source Corporation where she marketed IBM personal systems to the VA higher educational system; Automation Specialist for SouthTrust Corporation and Jefferson State Community College where she coordinated job fairs, presented career seminars, and provided job assistance to undergraduates and alumni; and Communications Link which she owned and specialized in facilitating career planning and software training workshops. Bridgette is also the Owner and Principal Consultant of Wilder HR Management & EEO Consulting which focuses on simplifying HR for small to mid- size businesses through customized solutions to manage their HR function. She earned an MBA from Averett University, a BA in Human Resources from Birmingham-Southern College, a BS in Workforce Education from Southern Illinois University and AAS in Computer Science from Jefferson State Community College. She is a graduate of the Furman University/ Riley Institute Diversity Leadership Academy and a recipient of the Coretta Scott King Humanitarian Award. Bridgette is a member of the Forbes Human Resources Council, SHRM Expertise Panel for Ethics & Corporate Social Responsibility and SHRM A-Team.

In this episode, Bridgette shares about how hybrid work, employee experience, and culture work differently in higher education, the role of technology, and much more.

Michael Lee

So Bridgette, welcome to At the Edge. And thank you so much for being here.

Bridgette Wilder

It's my pleasure.

Michael Lee

How is being in HR in education different from other industries?

Bridgette Wilder

Well, fortunately for me, in HR, I've had an opportunity to work in a variety of industries: higher education, non-profit, federal contracting. And it's been great for me to come back to education to be able to share that knowledge, not only with employees, but with students, because ultimately, the purpose of higher education is to prepare people for the world of work. And so I've been able now at CalArts to implement things that I've utilized in other industries, to help it to be moving to the next level, to be innovative.

Michael Lee

How has the pandemic affected higher ed, in terms of HR, in terms of remote work and hybrid work?

Bridgette Wilder

A lot of times, I think people don't think of higher ed as being a business. But it is. And so when the pandemic came around, it impacted us from one, the student experience, and then some students just didn't like a remote experience, and we lost them. So that impacts your bottom line. But it also forced us to be more innovative, because for the students that had to be virtual, we had to quickly turn around and provide teaching from a simulated standpoint, from a virtual standpoint, and you didn't have faculty that were prepared for that. So you have to quickly show them how to teach remotely, how to prepare their classes from that style of teaching when they hadn't done it before.

And from an employee perspective, you now have employees that don't get to see each other, because they're working virtually, but they still have to accomplish the goals. So you have to teach them how to manage their time, because they're at home and having to accomplish that work without interacting with their colleagues and their managers to have those quick conversations. And for leaders that are used to managing by walking around, now they have to learn, how do I manage that workforce that I can't physically see, and be successful in helping them to have what they need to do their job, but also help them feel included? If they're not physically in the office with me.

Michael Lee

When you're dealing with managing the hybrid situation, how do you use technology to manage that?

Bridgette Wilder

Well, HR had to closely work with it when this happened, because we have so many processes that involve seeing people. And now we had to automate things that were once to come in meet with me, and I'm going to give you the paperwork. So now we have to use things like Formstack, or Google Docs and create that to be an automated virtual experience, having more Zoom meetings. So having that technology, where if I'm doing this from home, that I have the right bandwidth, the right technology, the right computers, the right software, to allow me to onboard employees, to off-board employees, to teach employees and HR as a whole. Traditionally, that's not what we did, from a virtual perspective, because it's also involving people. So it required to think not only from the technical standpoint, but we had to start thinking differently about our jobs and enhance our emotional intelligence.

When I'm doing an Employee Relations meeting with an employee, a lot of what I'm doing is I'm not only paying attention to what I see and what I hear, but also what I see, sometimes from a virtual perspective, they can hide it. So I got to be able to not only hear what they say, but also figure out what they're not saying, to get to the root cause of their issue. So we've had to come up with a whole new set of skills of going from being transactional, to now being a business partner to say, Okay, let me find out what your needs are. Because now we're in a whole other world. And I got to teach managers how to lead virtually, and maybe I don't know how to do that. So I got to go get some education myself, in order to help my stakeholders.

Michael Lee

it doesn't seem like this is going to change anytime soon. We're going to continue with the situation, especially in education.

Bridgette Wilder

What I'm glad about is, we hope that this ends, but we also understand that it's going to happen again in some format, so we just can't drop teaching virtually, we always have to be prepared, that, Hey, if your body needs to go home, we need to be prepared to make that happen within a day or so, so that it doesn't impact our stakeholders as well as our employees. So from an HR perspective, get back to the basics. Do I know the contact information for all of my employees so that if I had to contact them via email or via phone, all that information is in my database system? If they've got to accomplish their work, having the resources already brought through it, and having their managers trained to be able to help them not panic, that we're getting ready to go back to virtual instead of being in person.

So I think if anybody is smart, whether it's higher education or industry, I don't think this is going to be over in a year or two. This is going to become a new normal for us, even if we eventually come back to work. But the other component of it, I don't think we're ever going

to get back to being one hundred percent in person. Because what this has told employees as well, is that they gotta have balance in their lives, and they expect flexibility from their employers. So we're gonna have some form of a hybrid workforce.

Michael Lee

What's the impact on culture?

Bridgette Wilder

I think if we're being honest, it's impacted significantly, because now we have two employee experiences going on, some that are here physically with us and the other half that's remote. They're not getting to engage like they used to. And that impacts the unity of a culture. It impacts the ability of a culture to say, This is who we are, when I can't see. That means that leaders have to say, I need to be intentional in managing those employee experiences, I'm investing just as much time in my virtual employees as I am in those polls that I could walk outside my office and say, Hey, what's going on? Can I help you today? But it also means putting in technology for them to be able to engage, whether that be Slack channels where they can communicate, whether that be through virtual coffee chats that they have set up with each other, or virtual lunches like they used to do when they were in person, now they can have a virtual lunch. And giving them the space and time to be able to do that, as well as giving people the space and time to just breathe, because we are in so many meetings right now virtually that nobody gets the time to think. Nobody gets time to just say, Okay, how can I be innovative and implement these things? Because I'm just going like a hamster wheel.

So we have to build in intentional things, build in intentional town halls, communicate, and we got to focus a lot more on communication without over communicating. Because we're not seeing all of our employees in one space. So we have to come up with intentional learning, intentional self-care, and intentional communication.

Michael Lee

And some of these solutions you're talking about - which ones have worked the best for you, and which ones have been the most challenging?

Bridgette Wilder

I have a hybrid staff. I have two employees that work remotely. I have two that are physically in the office with me. And so I protect my time when I have up time with my team. I don't like to have meetings where we just talk about what's going on in the business, we have uptime, because we share what we call the good feelings. I asked everybody to keep a Feel-good file. So when someone sends them a compliment for something that they did for them or just said, Hey, I appreciate you - put that in your Feel-good file. If they have done something that they felt impacted the workforce in a positive way, when we have our uptime as a team, they share that information.

I also require that all my team members have a power hour of learning. So they pick out one day a week where they are intentionally learning something that's going to develop them personally and professionally. And then we have to get back with the other team members when we have that uptime. So it's allowing them to develop themselves as an individual, but then to share their knowledge.

And then I have intentional retreats with my employees, even if we're doing it virtually, where we just shut down the office for that particular time. And we focus on what is it that's gonna make us the best team to serve our stakeholders and not allowing other meetings to say, No team, I can't meet with you. Because I need them to understand that you are important to me not only as professionals to help me get the objectives of the department done, but also important to me as individuals. So I've actually told them in my last team meeting yesterday, I told them to set aside time in their calendar, not only for lunch, but also for that time to take a little mental health break. Give me the first fifteen minutes, putting it in their calendar as a recurring event. And then they can send me a note to say, hey, Bridgette, this is my intentional time, and I won't bother them. Because I need them to understand that this is important to me, that it needs to be a part of your schedule. And I share with them between eight and nine, my calendar has a meeting because that's the time I'm taking my kids to school.

If you got a Virtual Employee and they're out sick, make a How call, which is, How are you? And I give them a set of questions that they can ask to engage this. Many managers are not comfortable in that they're used to saying, Hey, how would you do that? But in terms of engaging with people, especially when you don't see them, they have a little angst. So in my boot camps, I teach them how to do that. I do skill drills with the leaders on a one-on-one. And that allows them to feel comfortable.

Then for the employees, we are starting what's called a Leadership Development Consortium, where I'll be bringing in leaders from each area to help me develop curriculum that's intentional. So they know what needs to be upskilled, bench strength or succession planning. And then next quarter, what we're going to be doing is offering that curriculum to our employees, so they can sign up for that training, whether it be in-person or virtual, but having intentional learning. And managers are giving them the space and the time to do it. They don't have to be at their desk at all times, because they understand the importance of developing your workforce. Don't say you don't have time, because even though we're all busy, you're not working 24/7. You got some breathing room.

Michael Lee

One of the things that's happened with hybrid work is that people seem to be working longer hours because they don't have to leave the office. With academics, that must be even worse. So how do you help your hybrid workforce manage that?

Bridgette Wilder

Previously to coming to CalArts, I was at Albany State. And when we went hybrid, we went out in March, and we came back in June. During that pocket of time, people were all working

from home for the most part. And they just as you said, they worked more hours than what they did in person and they got stressed and they burned out.

So what I had to start doing was having boot camps not only for the leaders, but for employees, to share with them resources, but also give them tools to help them to manage their time and separate work from home. One of the things that leadership agreed to do is if your normal hours are eight to five, don't send people emails at six, seven, eight, nine, ten o'clock at night, because you know, hey, I'm gonna forget. I taught them how to use the scheduling book button on their email to send it out at eight in the morning. Because employees feel stressed, if they saw an email from their manager seven or eight, I got to reply, I got to reply, I don't want them to think I'm slacking. Don't put that pressure on them. And don't put that pressure on you. And that was an expectation from the President on down.

And so I communicate that same information here at CalArts, because people are so passionate about what they do. A lot of times they don't even think of it as work. But at some point, they get burnt out. And so what I try to communicate to people is, I'm not trying to tell you what to do, I'm trying to help you help yourself. And these are some tools and some resources that are going to help you to manage that, when you are working like a hamster.

It's not that you got a high tolerance for stress. You're saving yourself for burnout. So why set yourself up that way? My goal as your partner is to help you not go there. And then tell you, hey, Bridgette, I see that you're about to get to that point, I need you to step back, what can I do to help you?

And I think what has to happen is, we can't forget that leaders are employees too. So their leader has to be doing the same thing. Because otherwise they're going to be continuing to model the inappropriate behavior with good intention. But it's still not helping us.

Michael Lee

How has the employee experience changed? And how do you manage that?

Bridgette Wilder

It is brought to our attention that the employee experience is holistic. It's not just about providing them my in-person experience. It's about managing the experience from mental, physical, and emotional because they bring who they are to work. It's an emphasis to us that we have to pay attention to those employees that are working virtually, because they may feel I'm not getting the same opportunities, they may feel my boss is thinking that I'm not doing my job. So it's teaching leaders that they have to have intentional time for both of those and managing that. It's changed from the standpoint that people don't feel less connected even though we're on the internet and Zoom meetings 24/7 with each other. And so we have to find ways to have them feel connected, but not always in a formal sense, like I mentioned about virtual coffee chats or virtual coffee meetings, making it informal, where they can just connect with each other from that standpoint.

Michael Lee

So what I hear from you is that for you HR is very much about helping people.

Bridgette Wilder

Yeah, it is. And ironically, prior to me getting into HR, I was a software specialist because I didn't want to work with people. And the way I got into human resources, my boss came in and she said, Bridgette, you're going to have to teach the employees in the bank how to use your software. And I'm like, No, Sandy, I don't engage with people, especially non-technical people. That's why I'm a software specialist. Not gonna do it. She said, Yeah, you are.

So I needed a job. But I was such a techie. I went back to college at night, and majored in HR with a minor in Psych, so that I could understand non-technical people. And as I was studying that field, I found a lot of similarity in terms of HR and programming.

I'll give you an example. One of my first jobs in HR was as a recruiter. And so I, as a software specialist, always came up with a plan on how I was going to get to this use this code to get to that end result for what it needed to look like. I applied that same concept of writing a program to writing a recruitment plan to help me to be successful in recruiting. And so I saw the transferability of having those technical analytical skills in HR.

And because I'm not naturally engaging and introverted, that degree in psychology has helped me to pay attention to what people say as well as what they're not saying. But then my analytical part kicked in. So when they go left on me and say things that make me think, am I a person? I don't get irrational. I'm really neutral. I implement what I call the Columbo to help me understand. "I don't really understand."

And I really need for you to be able to do that. So I can provide you a solution, but I never get out of character, because that doesn't help me to solve their problem. And then it's not showing the high level has leveled me. And once they come down this way, Bridgette, I didn't mean to say that. I say, Hey, I'm not taking it too personally. I know that this is impactful to you. So let's now level out and talk about what your issue is. So I can help you.

Michael Lee

Bridgette, if you could take the traditional office and put it into a computer so that everybody anywhere could be in the office in that way, what would it look like?

Bridgette Wilder

For me, even though I like my structure, and I like the concept of everything being very open. But then when you get into the center, you have that brain trust that's allowing you to go in different directions, where you got your communication piece, you got your collaboration piece, and then you got your piece where I can be innovative. And depending upon where you are, you can go into those different areas and pull from it like an online virtual file, and say, Okay, I'm working on collaboration, what's involved in that, and you pull out that library of online things.

But then I, when I'm ready to take a break, I go to my communication, I want to have lunch with Bridgette, I'm gonna have a virtual chat or, or lunch with Bridgette, I see it being that way to allow that freedom. Because regardless of whether you are remote or hybrid, the way I see it is that in order for my employees to feel like they're included and belong, they have to feel they can be who they are.

So I don't want a program that only allows you to go a straight arrow, whether it's a yes or no, oh, you gotta have this, you gotta do that. I want it to be structured enough that I'm giving them resources. But at the same time, they can decide which direction, as long as it's getting them to that end goal. I need them to be right.

Michael Lee

Communication, Collaboration, those are two elements you just mentioned. What other elements need to be in this place?

Bridgette Wilder

I think you have to have an element of structure. And by that, I mean, you've got to give people a framework in which they need to operate that then allows them flexibility. Not comparing employees to kids, but yes, using kids as an analogy, they have always loved their freedom, but if you give them too much freedom... It's the same thing with employees. They need to know these are the rules of engagement. But within these rules of engagement, I still have flexibility to be who I am, because otherwise you can't get anything done. And if you're in business, whether it be higher education or corporate America, you're not just there to exist, you're there to help your stakeholders. And those frameworks, that structure, helps that to happen. So I would let everybody know, just be who you are, what you are. Because if we are doing that, and there are two hundred of us, we are going in different directions, we got to have a GPS.

Michael Lee

So how do we provide that GPS in the hybrid or remote space? When you're sitting there and your people are all over the place? How do you help guide them, so that they can actually be effective?

Bridgette Wilder

The thing that you got to focus on is consistency. One of the communication methods that we use in higher ed a lot is town halls. And most town halls are held in person, but then adding an element so that the people that are working virtually can be engaging with it as it's happening versus being in a review of it.

So I think this pandemic has created another C, which is Crisis intervention. You have to always be thinking, What's gonna happen? And how am I going to have the tools there? So the same thing when it comes to virtual - How can you communicate with your employees? Like I said,

we're having ongoing live virtual events that not only people in person can attend, but also the people that are there virtually.

Another component of that is building in time for your employees to tell you what's working and not working, to find out what's working successfully and what's not and what you need to stop doing. And letting them know whether you implemented it. A lot of times employees give us ideas, and we might implement them but don't tell them and they think, Well, I'm just gonna stop giving insight.

But letting them know and promoting that and promoting it not only in your staff meetings, but one of the elements we use, we have a lot of televisions around, and not only are we promoting what's happening within different events, but featuring some things that employees might do.

Michael Lee

How much do you think you need to bring into the hybrid situation about people's personal lives? Is it better to bring that in more than you would normally?

Bridgette Wilder

Yeah, that that has to be imperative now, especially in this hybrid workforce, because sometimes you have an employee, life happens, maybe they got to take care of mom and dad, and because of the pandemic, there are less places that can provide care for them. Maybe their child is not old enough to get a vaccination. And you got to have online virtual learning with them. And the parent has to be there. So looking at how you can modify their job to allow them to be able to do that, while at the same time getting their job done.

So I'll give you an example. If you have an employee that has one of those life events, you work with them and say, Hey, Jane, I know you need to take care of your mom or do virtual schooling with your kid. But I also need you to be available to do your job during the week. Let's talk about what that schedule looks like. And it may be something allowing them to start earlier or later, or to have a two hour pocket in the middle of the day to be able to do that online teaching with their kid, but then they extend their hours by a certain amount of time over the week. So they end up in that forty hour week. It takes a lot more engagement now than what it did in the past, you just can't say you got to work nine to five. Maybe you have an employee that has shown through their consistency that they can do their work no matter where they are. But you still got to have mechanisms.

So one of the things that I provide to employees that are working remotely, they have a little law that they put out a high level summary of what they did each day. And they turn that in by the end of the week to their leader. So their leader can look at it and say okay, I see Brigitte spending a lot of time doing this particular task, I need her to regroup. And so when I have my uptime with Bridgette, I'm gonna say, Hey, I need you to modify this because this is your priority. Let's talk about how we can do that and collaborate with them. Don't be dictatorial in how you go about doing it. But then if you say they're not doing what they need to do, have that crucial conversation. Say, Bridgette, you're not putting in a forty hour work week, in order

for you to maintain this flexibility, I need to see some course corrections and this is what I need to see. And if they don't, then you have to follow through until Bridgette, you need to come back and I'm in the office. And so it's having those tough conversations that we don't enjoy having, but we have to in order to get the work done, as well as balancing the needs of the organization. Bridgette is not doing her job, Jane and Jen are having to do it, and that's not fair to them.

Michael Lee

Bridgette, if you had to leave the listeners with one thing that they could remember Bridgette Wilder for, what would you tell them?

Bridgette Wilder

One of the things that I say when I leave an organization like when I left Albany State, I send an email to the workforce, and I told them I hope that I left the work environment better than what it was before I came. I hope to be remembered as a person that gave my best but also, that I care because I did and I do. And I wasn't perfect. But I did what I felt was right.

And I want them to remember that they have greatness within them. And no matter what anybody else says, they need to believe that. And so I want people to remember me as being that person that said, Hey, you don't see it, but I see it and believe it, and I can help you to do that. And they believe in themselves and become the best version they are. I try to be authentic. And I want them to be authentic, because we're just human beings that are perfectly imperfect. And we try to be better than where we were the day before.

Michael Lee

Bridgette, thanks for closing on words of wisdom. I really appreciate having spent time with you.

Bridgette Wilder

Thank you, Michael.