

00:00 Martin Schneider: CareerMinded is sponsored by CareerMinds, a leading provider of virtual outplacement and career transition services. You can learn more about CareerMinds at careerminds.com.

00:13 MS: Welcome to Career Minded, the show that explores the human side of human resources. I'm your host, Martin Schneider. Each episode we'll talk to HR professionals and thought leaders about the personal aspects of what they do and why they do it, all the while discovering what drives the people that drive the people that drive businesses today.

[music]

00:40 MS: One of the things I love about doing this show is discovering new businesses and learning about the unique challenges that HR professional space at each individual organization. And today's guest is a great example. Kathleen Brenk is the Director of Human Resources at TruStile, which is a manufacturing company that makes doors; High quality, custom-built home or office, interior or exterior, extremely cool doors. And Kathleen would like you to know that even though this is a production plant, these aren't assembly line, mass-produced products either. Because of the highly customizable nature of these doors, there's a lot of artistry and craftsmanship that goes into their creation, delivery and installation. Kathleen sees herself in a unique position to help these craftspeople. To use her words, she gets to "support the people that make the thing". Another part of Kathleen's interview that I find very interesting is when she talks about supporting a workforce that is highly comprised of immigrants and refugees. This intrigues me because while of course, building this workforce offers unique risks and challenges, which you'll hear her talk about, they've decided that for their business, overall, it's worth it.

01:51 MS: In addition to government incentives, there's also business value for companies that make immigrant and refugee hiring part of their HR strategy. In addition to getting generally motivated and loyal employees, you also get added brand value, actual proof that your company is living its core values. This is important because more and more consumers are expecting businesses to create positive community impact in addition to providing quality goods and services. And in Deloitte's 2017 survey of US millennials, the majority of them reported that they want to work for businesses which engage in "good causes". Working to support refugees or recent immigrants as part of an HR strategy is one way for companies to show that they can provide these opportunities. Ultimately, as HR professionals, we all must find the best solution for us to support the people that make our products and services run. And as Kathleen herself can tell you, that means we get the chance to open a lot of doors. Here's Kathleen.

[music]

03:03 MS: Okay, my guest today is Kathleen Brenk, the Vice President of Human Resources at TruStile Doors, which is a manufacturing door company in Denver, Colorado. Kathleen, thanks for being on the show.

03:12 Kathleen Brenk: Yeah, you bet.

03:13 MS: I wanna get a little bit into your background first. We wanted to talk about the challenges of human resources specific to manufacturing like blue collar industries. Your

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background is not in doing HR for manufacturing, is it? You've got a couple of tech companies, career services firms, and then you made the transition to manufacturing last July. What was that like?

03:36 KB: Yeah, my career actually started in tech, and then I spent five years at a countertop fabrication shop, that was a subsidiary of the Home Depot, and then I had another five years in medical device manufacturing. So where I am now is sort of like coming home.

03:56 MS: My mistake. You started in manufacturing and then you went to tech, and then you came back. When we spoke before, you had some pretty choice things to say about tech companies trying to give you strategies in the HR sphere, in your particular industry. Can you talk to me a little bit more about that?

04:14 KB: Sure, I mean, my time in tech, I think just for me, it's kind of not my people and I know that folks in tech work really hard and are trying to develop amazing things, but for me personally, there's something about the workforce that makes a physical product and we're all working to pay mortgages and put kids through college, but the workforce that's in manufacturing, just for me, I feel like they're just a little more real life folks.

04:52 MS: Expand on that a little bit more, what's the differences between working HR for... I'll say blue collar even though I hate the term... For blue collar workers as opposed to your tech business industries, what needs do they need or what needs are different and how...

05:09 KB: I think how they get and absorb information is very, very different. You can't send an email to all of your employees because they don't all have email. They're working on the shop floor and they're making your product and they're worried about quality, and they're worried about the uptime of the equipment. And so how we communicate organizational information, keep them informed in a way that's transparent, is different. It requires face time, whereas in a tech firm, there's an app for that, there's an app for everything. Well, there's not... That's not always a solution when your workforce is English as a Second Language or maybe might not even have a smartphone. So it's just a different consideration for the workforce and how they get information.

06:07 MS: Have tech companies come and try to sell you on kind of those sorts of solutions? Have you had to turn down a few tech companies who have introduced HR solutions or tried to sell it to you at your job at TruStile or any of the other manufacturing places?

06:24 KB: Yes. Daily. And I would say moreso here, but I think that's a function of timing and role. So I've been out of manufacturing for six years. And I think that over the last six years, tech solutions for HR have become really, really hot. It's a big space, and I do think there's a lot of cool stuff going on but it's just not always a solution for, not just manufacturing but if you think about hospitality or even healthcare, those folks are not sitting around in front of a computer working, they're out and about and interacting with patients or customers or consumers and it's just a very different workforce. And so sometimes those tech solutions are not really the solution. I think what's frustrating for me is that folks either don't understand that or don't do their homework, but as a new VP that's like fresh meat, for sales folks, it's like, "Oh there's a new VP in this company, let me go see if I can sell her some stuff." Which I try really, really hard, honestly, to respect that effort and respond to people, and help them understand why my answer is no or my answer is not at this time.

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07:49 MS: Well, let's go ahead and do that homework for them right now, let's make it easy for them. Tell me about TruStile and tell me... What I like just the past couple of minutes we've been talking is you clearly have a connection with the people that, the workforce that you're representing. Tell me a little bit about what TruStile does and what makes these people that you're representing so special to you.

08:09 KB: So, I'll start kind of jumping in the wayback machine. I grew up in Central Pennsylvania, in a fairly industrial town. My parents were both educators, but the vast majority of my friends' parents worked at BorgWarner, they worked at Caterpillar, and they worked at Harley Davidson. That kind of salt of the earth workforce, like I said earlier, feels like coming home to me. So coming here, in past manufacturing organizations, like I said, there's something about a physical product, and the product that TruStile makes, we make custom interior doors. They are incredibly high end, they're beautiful, they're going into multi-million dollar homes, they're going in to high-end hotels, and we don't make a door until it's designed, either by an architect or an interior designer, custom home builder. And then we make the doors.

09:13 KB: So while it is a manufactured product, it's not a one after the other widget. Every door is unique. And so, the workforce that's here really has an eye for that. And so I think the craftsmanship that goes into our product makes for a really special workforce. They work really hard. We have a plant here in Denver. We have another plant in Iowa. I would say our total production team is probably about 350 or so, that work long days and we have a night crew and they work really hard and they care about the quality of the product.

10:00 MS: I'm looking at your LinkedIn profile right now, there's a bit you have here where you say that you are honoring the people that actually make the thing that makes the money, and I absolutely love that. It feels like you're really doing your best to honor these folks, these 350 people across two different plants. I also think it's real cool that these are not assembly line products, these are not mass manufactured, you're creating something customized and unique. Every time I speak to an HR person, one of the topics that gets brought up, including just a couple of minutes ago with you, is internal communications and some of the challenges. You mentioned that you can't do like an app. What are some of the new procedures that you've implemented or what are some of the challenges that you've had to face while working with manufacturing companies, either at TruStile or at the healthcare firm before?

10:50 KB: Yeah, some of the solutions that happen here with regard to internal communications, it's really not complicated, it's having structure and discipline to make sure that managers have the information that they need, so that when they have their shift kickoff meetings, they're able to share the right information with their folks. We have plant meetings every single month where we have time with the entire production staff, and that happens at both plants. Our CEO has open book meetings, usually, I'm gonna say five, six times a year, where we share how the company is doing, we're very transparent about the profitability of the organization, we rolled out profit-sharing last year which has been a really incredible way to engage folks in. You control your own destiny. If quality products were going out the door, guess what? We're more profitable and your profit-sharing check at the end of the year is bigger. Those are really simple little things that we can do. As well as being available. We don't walk out the door at 5 o'clock. I have really awesome folks that a couple of times a week, they're here until 7 o'clock, making sure that they're available for the night shift to come in and ask questions, and being really patient with our English as a Second Language team members, it's not complicated, but it just takes time.

12:21 MS: These are kind of your people, you get along real well with the people at your plant. You like to honor them and serve them. What was it like then a couple of years ago when you were working in the tech industry with people who are, let's say, not your people or just communicate or function in different ways for you, what was that challenge like for you and how did you still drive organizational cultures in an industry that may be not your top choice for communication?

12:53 KB: I think my challenge with software firms, while I certainly learned a lot in every single one of those experiences, I just felt like sometimes, the complaints were more whiny. I feel terrible saying that, right, because everybody's problems are real to them. And your reality is your reality. For me, it just felt just not real and that some of the complaints were superficial, I guess, whereas I feel like with folks on a production floor making a physical product, it's just a difference in life and what they're trying to achieve. We, at our plant here, we have probably 35% Burmese population and they are refugees, we have probably... And then another 35% Latino population, and the rest are a mix of people from all over the world, as well as from this country, obviously, and they're working for the same thing we are, but they're working frankly, a lot harder.

14:14 MS: Give me an example of the complaints that you're talking about, what are some of the issues that you have to deal with on the production floor? Some of the complaints that you would get that seemed to be kind of unique to that industry that you wouldn't get in a different firm?

14:28 KB: I mean some of the things that we try and assist with and fix, and find long-term solutions for here have a lot to do with making sure we have the right maintenance tech staff in order to keep the equipment up and running. Our workforce just wants to make a good quality product and so when equipment goes down, that's a problem. They don't wanna be standing around, they'd rather be making things than sweeping the floor, waiting for a machine to come back up. So making sure we have the right talent, so that their equipment is ready and running is a huge part of what we do. And looking at not just the problem in front of us, but what is the long-term solution and building out a really high quality, highly skilled maintenance staff. And then little things like a car has broken down and we have a fairly strict point system or attendance because without folks on the floor, we don't make a door.

15:33 KB: So we need people to be here, so we try and find all kinds of also just life solutions for people. And we're pretty generous with, like I said, we have a very large immigrant and refugee population, so we get it if you have to go home for a month or two to deal with family stuff sometimes. And so we try and be understanding of that and those are the kinds of things that draw me to this workforce.

16:01 MS: Yeah, I wanna talk a little bit more about the immigrant population and the refugee population. That's something that we haven't encountered before in our interviews and probably something a little bit unique to you. When it comes to HR stuff, when it comes to, I guess, even the nitty-gritty paperwork, but also fulfilling their needs, what are you doing to honor these people as they are integrated and to bring them in and to make them feel welcome? What are some of the things that you've had to implement while welcoming them?

16:30 KB: Yeah, we work really closely with some local non-profits that are involved with these folks' lives on a really intimate level, from housing and that sort of thing. Some of the things that are different is we have DREAMers on staff that are right now, really stressed out and really

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worried about what's going to happen. And obviously, certainly we cannot employ someone if they are not employable, but we do everything that we can to reassure them that as long as they can be here, we are here for them. The refugees that are here, they have Medicaid for a short amount of time when they first arrive in the country, so we make sure that they understand, "Hey, look, our medical plans work like this, and as soon as your Medicaid is running out, then we need to sit down and talk about your family situation, your situation with your kids..." So there is an aspect of social programs that we have to have a more intimate understanding of, based on our workforce. And I have a really incredible senior generalist here in Denver that has really ingrained herself with understanding those programs and how they work and when they end, and keeping on top of people's documentation and making sure we've got all of our... All of our ducks in a row, as it goes to make sure that all these folks can continue to work.

17:58 MS: What's your favorite part of the job?

18:00 KB: My favorite part of the job in my role I would say it's twofold. I do love walking the floor and just seeing our product made. It's just a fascinating process. And going back into the area of the shop where a lot of detail work is done, where glass and molding is added to the door is really a craftsman's process. I love watching that. And then on the business side, we have a really amazing leadership team that is fairly egoless, which is pretty odd and unique. [laughter] It takes a certain amount of ego and self-confidence to be a CEO, right? Like...

18:42 MS: Sure.

18:43 KB: But the leadership that exists here is so willing to listen and spend money where it makes sense, and shift and change, and really looking towards the future. This place has grown, since the downturn, has doubled in size, and we will double again over the next three years. And so keeping sort of the eye on the prize while still honoring the people that make the thing, that's what I'm here for, and so I'm really in a beautiful place from a career perspective, where it's a beautiful product, it's an amazing workforce, it's a leadership team that the executive staff is me, CEO, President and COO, and our SVP of sales and marketing. And so to be in an organization where HR is regarded at that level and we talk about business issues and how the people connect to that, it's really, I would say, I have found my happy place.

19:56 MS: [chuckle] That's great. I wanna talk a little bit about your volunteer experience. You were the co-chair of DisruptHR for about three, almost four years.

20:06 KB: Yeah.

20:10 MS: I've been to some DisruptHR events. I really enjoy them. They're an organization that is a fresher idea of what human resources should be. A lot of real innovation comes from them and all of the speeches that I've seen at DisruptHR events are really cool. But my question to you would be, what drove you to that field? What do you think about HR needs to be disrupted? What about this thing that we do needs to be changed most in your opinion?

20:37 KB: I think if I could change one thing about the community at large, it would be for us to face business with a little less risk aversion.

20:52 MS: Interesting.

20:53 KB: There's just a lot of fear-based kind of stuff. I think some conferences have a lot of fear-based content, and I'm not... Like I have had EEOC charges, I've been in organizations where we've been sued. I get that that stuff happens. That's life, that's the human condition. But I don't know that HR putting 5,000 policies into place to make sure that that we never ever have an EEOC charge or... That's not the real world and it's not gonna work anyway so [chuckle].. I'd rather have real conversations with people and talk through options than kind of this immediate, "No, we can't do that because of Title VII," Or, "No, we can't," and certainly we're all gonna adhere to the law, but I feel that if we simply approached problems from doing the right thing and being fair, that solves a multitude of issues. So that, honestly, I think is the one thing that I would change. There's all these conversations about blowing up performance reviews, and should we be people operations instead of HR or should we be employee experience instead of HR? But I think if you don't change your practice, and you don't start speaking the language of business and really understand and bring to the conversation the people aspect of business, then changing the name of HR to something else is lipstick on a pig.

22:34 KB: You haven't changed anything. That doesn't make a difference. What makes a difference is how we interact with the business. And for me personally, that is being less risk-averse, being willing to consider all of the stuff, not just the employment law that's in my head, 'cause certainly it's in my head, but I wanna understand the business and the product and the quality and the customer, and all of the things that make a business run and grow and the people are a piece of that puzzle.

23:05 MS: Looking at it more from a, almost an environmental, like a biodome sort of perspective, seeing the links in the environment.

23:14 KB: Yes, absolutely. When I first arrived here, we worked 12-hour shifts. Here in Denver, we have a plant where the door is created and assembled, and then we have another plant where if the doors were pre-hung, meaning, we build a jam, a door jam and put the door in the door jam, so when it arrives at the home, you really just stick it in a hole in the wall. And so I've done full 12 hour shifts with our supervisors. I wanna understand what their day is like, how much were they running around between these different plants? What does downtime do? What happens when people don't show up? How are they scrambling to get team members on the right machines in order for the doors to just keep getting made? I think again HR really understanding that and spending that kind of time, it changes your perspective. And frankly it changes the perspective of other people and how they view the HR function. Like are you a partner? Are you intimately integrated? Or are you sitting in an office, doing stuff?

24:26 MS: Alright, so I gotta ask. You seem really passionate about these people, you seem really passionate about this product. Tell me about the doors. Do you have a favorite one that you've seen go out? Can you describe one for me.

24:39 KB: Oh gosh, so we... I don't know where they were going, I think it was a home in Florida, but this door was probably... Well it was a set of doors and they were like eight feet tall, with a arched top and just really, really beautiful molding, and an arched top and it was sent out pre-hung. Not only did we build this really beautiful arched door, but we also created the jam. So, there's framing that goes around a door called a jam and that was arched as well. And so we have a craftspeople, woodworking craftspeople that literally take layer after layer of wood and glue, and

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bend it and bend it and bend it, in order to perfectly match this arched massive door. And that's just so cool to see. It's really amazing to see. The other awesome thing that we do is when people are renovating historic homes. If they send us a piece of existing molding, we can 100% match it.

25:50 MS: Oh, that's cool.

25:51 KB: Yeah, it's super cool.

25:52 MS: Alright, Kathleen, thank you for opening your door to us [chuckle] and thanks for being on the show, we really appreciate it.

26:00 KB: Yeah, thank you. It was super fun, thanks for having me.

26:03 MS: And that about wraps it up for this edition of Career Minded. If you like what you heard, be sure to give us reviews and share with your friends and your colleagues. Don't forget to subscribe on the podcaster of your choice, so you never miss an episode. We've got many more in-depth interviews with real HR leaders coming up, so you're gonna wanna stay tuned in. And as always, for more HR news and information, check out careerminds.com. Career Minded is written, edited and hosted by me, Martin Schneider, and produced by Allie Brown. From all of us at Career Minded, we'll see you next time.