

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

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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 people that drive the people that drive businesses today.

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00:40 MS: A few weeks ago, the New York Times ran a personal essay in their Rites Of Passage section written by Maryam Banikarim, a former Chief Marketing Officer at Hyatt, NBC Universal and Univision. The headline asks "What Am I If Not Employed?" and inside, Banikarim details her reasons for stepping away from the workforce and seeking some downtime from a 30-plus year career. She's candid and forthcoming about her insecurities and her doubts. She honestly addresses concerns like, what will I do now and how do I transition away and will I be able to get back into work? But it's that title question that interests me the most: What am I, if I'm not employed? In an American workforce culture that increasingly defines people by their job titles, it's refreshing to see somebody with a resume that's this full and this accomplished, recognize the need to break away for personal reasons. She addresses the desire to rediscover her interests after work to be present for her son and her grandmother, and most of all the essay is about Maryam writing about herself as a person, not as a C-suite executive. That's why I wanted to use this essay to introduce our guest today. Courtney Johnson is the VP of Human Resources at one of my personal favorite institutions, the Philadelphia Zoo.

02:00 MS: Our conversation covers everything from infrastructure projects to internal communications to the pregnancy of a giraffe. But one section I wanna highlight is Courtney's pride in her organizations off-boarding policies. A lot is said about onboarding new employees but we don't talk as much about the process of transitioning employees out when they choose to leave. Courtney does, however. She talks about the importance of respecting individual departure needs and doing everything that an organization can to ensure that a departing employee feels appreciated and respected on their way out, whether it's into retirement or onto a new job, or just taking a much needed pause. These policies help remind employees that the organization sees them as a person first and a staff member second, and I think that helps eliminate the need for "what am I" questions like the ones Maryam asks. And now, here's the interview.

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03:18 MS: My guest today is Courtney Johnson who is the Vice President of HR at one of my favorite places in this entire city, the Philadelphia Zoo, which is super cool to me, 'cause that combines some of my favorite loves which is looking at red pandas and talking HR. So thank you so much for being on the show with us, Courtney.

03:38 Courtney Johnson: Thank you for having me. Great to be here.

03:40 MS: Alright, let's just jump right into this. We were talking a little bit before about how everybody in HR seems to... Well, not everybody but a good chunk of HR people tend to find their calling, a little bit later, but I went and looked through your LinkedIn profile, and you had an International Relations degree...

03:57 CJ: Yes I did.

03:58 MS: In college, which... Maybe that comes in handy, it sounds like it probably does.

[chuckle]

04:02 CJ: You'd be surprised.

04:04 MS: Can you tell me just a little bit about how you got into this realm and how you climbed up that ladder to all the way to VP and kinda how you got involved in the HR realm?

04:13 CJ: Sure thing. So it's actually really important to note that part of working at the Philadelphia Zoo, I worked for Target, and at the time I was recruited to work for that company when I was graduating from the University of Delaware, not because I had any retail experience, but because I had been the president of a dance company at the University of Delaware. Yes, and what Target did and I think they did it exceptionally well, was they were not concerned with whether or not people had retail or operational experience, they were looking for leaders and so they went and they mined different university campuses for individuals who had demonstrated leadership skill set before entering into the workforce.

04:51 CJ: And so I was really fortunate to be given an opportunity at the time to work for Target, and go through an aggressive leadership development program. And coming out of that leadership development program supported store side operations and it was through that process that I realized that approximately 90% of the activities that I was being drawn to, that I was really engaged in and wanted to participate in, were really tied to human resources. Their structure is a little bit different in that there's five or six operational leaders per se, to every HR person, so those positions are few and far between, compared to other roles.

05:23 CJ: And so at that time, I essentially approached my boss and said, "I think that I would really like an opportunity to explore human resources, and if you think that I'm a good fit for it, will you throw my hat in the ring for the next job that comes around the corner?" And that's exactly what happened. So I was given a great opportunity to then switch from operations into human resources with Target, and be given a great deal of training in Human Resources at that time. So that was what brought me to human resources in the first place. From there, I will say that it was a journey supporting human resources and doing everything from a generalist perspective, I think is a really important step for most human resources leaders, that you've done everything from payroll to benefits administration, hiring, firing, all of the moving pieces that happen in between. And so when I was prepared to make a move out of retail specifically, I looked at the Philadelphia Zoo's website and found that there was an opening for Human Resources manager position there, and that was what brought me to the zoo, initially.

06:19 MS: So tell me about that conversion then, 'cause you went from super corporate big-box

retail to a non-profit sphere in one of the most beloved non-profit spheres at that. Tell me about what that shift was like, going from those different worlds, essentially.

06:34 CJ: You know, it was a different world. In some ways, there were many similarities to the operational components of the work, certainly both at Target and at the Philadelphia Zoo, there's a really big focus on seasonal hiring, because of the... Just the seasonality of the business. That said, for me, probably the most startling conversion from the Target space into Philadelphia Zoo was resource, really, frankly, just meaning that coming from a place like Target, they were so much invested at the corporate level in policies and procedures and roll out of different new programs, and it was all essentially created in the corporate space, and then pushed down out into the store level. And what I learned really quickly was the really compelling part about working in a nonprofit organization, is the ability to be entrepreneurial in your work, you have to create programs from scratch. And the reality is that even if you've seen a best practice work in another environment, it may not be the best practice for your current environment.

07:30 MS: So when you say that the difference was amount of resource, we mean money, right?

07:35 CJ: Well, [chuckle] yes and no, yes and no, yes, certainly, I will say, that money was a factor in that, and that the collateral that's created in a corporate environment and pushed out at scale to stores is pretty significant. What I will say that was really interesting as well for me was the transition from working as part of a really big network of peers who had the same job as me across the country who I could tap into at any time for any reason, to an environment where you were part of a much smaller human resources team, there was nobody who had the same job as you specifically, and so that network went from literally hundreds to thousands down to two or three people that you're working with in a space at one time.

08:14 MS: You said you've got to be entrepreneurial and you've got to design your own programs and positions. It was also more like you also had to.

08:21 CJ: Yes, there...

08:22 MS: That you got to and you had to.

08:23 CJ: Yes, there was definitely a need for that, [chuckle] there wasn't really an alternative. So, I think that at that time I really learned the value of what it meant to again, build something from scratch, and not just build it, but have to find a way to be able to maintain it over time. You talk about blood, sweat and tears going into something. And there was thankfully, not very much blood, a little bit of sweat, and not all that often tears, but there was definitely a lot of hard work that went into building some of those preliminary programs when I was in that first role.

08:52 MS: Like what? What were some of the programs?

08:53 CJ: At the time, I was working with a really talented recruiter, who I am so pleased to say actually left the organization at one point to explore other opportunities and had since boomeranged back and is part of the Human Resources team now, as a human resources manager and...

09:07 MS: Excellent.

09:09 CJ: It was fabulous. And together we really worked hard at creating interview guides and a set of specific skills and attributes that we were looking for in each one of our seasonal positions since that was such a huge area of focus for us. At the time, we were also rebuilding the department and filling open roles within our own team, and working on developing new policies and procedures that would support the organization through rapid change.

09:29 MS: Let's talk about what you just said about that former employee that boomeranged and came back, 'cause when we met about a month ago you said that one of the things you're really proud of at the zoo is off-boarding. We talk a lot about onboarding, the process of bringing people into an environment, but you seem really proud of how all former workers of the zoo speak of the zoo and how pleased they were after they left, and then apparently came back in certain cases. Tell me a little bit about what you do to off-board people and how that's a source of pride for you.

10:02 CJ: Thanks, yes. So we do hope that anybody who leaves the zoo, does so in a really healthy and productive way and that they feel a connection to the organization mainly because it is a very unique work environment. There is no getting over that, and it tends to make a really big impact on people in their life and their careers, does not mean that every day is sunshine and rainbows, and that we do everything perfectly, but at the end of the day, the combination of our mission, the really unique environment, and just a really, really interesting mix of people that we bring together in the organization, I think it has a lot of stay power for people beyond when they leave. A couple of the things that we do related to the actual exit process and off-boarding, if you will, we do the standard things, an exit interview. And actually I should say I don't ever wanna gloss over the importance of that. Exit interviews are a really compelling way for human resources professionals to find out what's going on that somebody may not be willing to share prior to that process, you hope that you have the right mechanisms for two-way communication before someone's exit interview.

11:02 CJ: However, a well-crafted exit interview, I think can help you get at some underlying issues. The other thing that we do in addition to the exit interview process is that certainly respecting the wishes of individuals, whether they choose to have a farewell party, if you will, or not, or launching or some other celebration. We really take time as an organization to stop and say, "Thank you and farewell" to people, depending on the position that you've been in and how long you've been part of the organization. Sometimes, we will do truly an all-staff celebration with a picture slide show and gifts that represent the zoo and its history, and the role that those individuals played in shaping our current state, as well as what we hope will happen in the future, and not to be lost in all of this either, is that all of our employees are given a set of complementary tickets in addition to a zoo membership as an employee, and so at the time that we have people exiting the organization, we don't take those things back, we really encourage people to continue to stay close to the organization, both as a member and through continuing to visit, even beyond their last day.

12:04 MS: So it sounds like you're really focusing on employee appreciation, making them feel appreciated as they leave.

12:10 CJ: Yes, absolutely.

12:12 MS: So you've talked a little bit about how this is a unique environment to work in. So besides the obvious, most people don't have baby giraffes on their way to the office...

12:22 CJ: I am very fortunate. [chuckle]

12:25 MS: Tell me a couple of things that make your particular environment unique.

12:28 CJ: So there's so many things that make our environment unique. I still remember within my first 48 hours of working at the zoo, we had an employee who was working with one of what we call our program animals who are able to be handled by a certain set of skilled employees who train these animals and are part of demonstrations that we do, and at the time we had an armadillo and it crawled up on itself the way that armadillos do, and unfortunately caught an employee's finger, right, in one of the folds and it was not broken, it was just a sprain. But I remember thinking that this is one of those environments where even everything down to your worker's compensation plans will look very different here, so...

[laughter]

13:05 MS: How do you fill that out?

13:06 CJ: It's an interesting process. So what I will say is that on the animal side, there are certainly really specific skill sets that we look for, specific to animal husbandry for the individuals who care for animals. On the other side, we have the same functions and things that you would expect to see in many other environments, finance and human resources and marketing, and all of those components. We also have what we sort of say as a small city inside in the zoo, we have trash and recycling and public safety and all kinds of different moving pieces. So we're definitely a complex operation for our size. And that's definitely what makes it really interesting and no day being the same as the one before.

13:46 MS: You asked me not to ask you any questions about animals?

[chuckle]

13:50 CJ: I didn't say that exactly.

13:50 MS: Before we... You told me that there were three basic animal facts that you knew.

13:55 CJ: I know more than that. [chuckle]

13:57 MS: But does that happen to you often, when you tell people that you work at the zoo?

14:01 CJ: I do get a lot of questions about animals. More specifically, I get a lot of funny jokes about whether or not I have to administer a dental plan for the hippos or things along those lines, but having worked at the zoo for close to 12 years at this point...

14:13 MS: I wish I had come up with that joke! I should have written something like that!

[chuckle]

14:18 CJ: Yes, I'm sorry that you missed the opportunity, but no, at this point, having worked at the zoo for close to 12 years, I have absorbed a lot of animal facts, having a four-year-old daughter who comes and visits the zoo quite frequently as well, she's absorbing her own facts and testing me on

them at home, so she's keeping me sharp.

14:34 MS: Alright, what's your favorite?

14:35 CJ: My favorite animal at the zoo, hands down, is Tony, our white rhinoceros. He is fabulous.

14:40 MS: I meant a favorite animal fact, but I also love that rhino.

14:43 CJ: Okay, yes, he is fantastic. I would say that probably one of my favorite... I'll go to Tony on this. One of my favorite animal facts is that his horn is actually made out of hair.

14:52 MS: Oh yeah!

14:53 CJ: And that is not something that people would typically know.

14:55 MS: That is excellent. You actually have a personal connection to one of the new mothers at the zoo I wanna talk about.

15:02 CJ: I do, I do. So, in addition to my lovely four-year-old daughter, I have a five-month-old son and Stella, our female giraffe, and I were on baby watch at the same time, and we were neck and neck, no pun intended, and she did begin...

15:17 MS: Pun intended, don't lie!

15:19 CJ: A little, and she ended up giving birth to her baby boy about a month before my son was born. So we'll always have that special connection.

15:29 MS: You told me that, and I had to go and look it up and see how long giraffes are pregnant for and it is like 14 months, the gestation period.

15:37 CJ: I think it's only fair that because she was pregnant for substantially longer than I was, that she ended up having her baby first, so...

15:44 MS: You've been at the zoo for 12 years. During that time, what would you say has been probably the biggest challenge, either to you personally or to the zoo as an organization?

15:54 CJ: So that's a great question. I think that when I look back at the 12 years that I've spent with the organization, we have gone through a tremendous amount of change. One of the biggest and most significant changes that we've experienced, is our commitment to Zoo360, which is our animal exploration trail system that connects different buildings across the organizations that animals are actually able to leave their home exhibit space and travel to different places around the zoo.

16:20 MS: Super cool.

16:21 CJ: It is incredibly cool. If you have not come to see it, I encourage you to do so.

16:24 MS: It's very cool to be walking around and just look up and go, "That's a tiger!"

16:28 CJ: Yes, yes. And so, it's everything from small arboreal animals to big cats, as well as our Great Apes that have access to the trails as well. And what we realized in the time that we were creating that system and exploring it, and obviously just like any other great big project, it involves a lot of trial and error. What we uncovered in the process of creating these trails building them and finding out how to operate them properly was that it was really actually forcing the organization to change in many ways under the surface that people wouldn't expect. It caused our fundraising model to look different, our construction schedules to look different. It really, really forced the animal keepers themselves to look at a very different model for animal care as it related to now using additional spaces and communicating across buildings, and it has really forced us to be nimble in the way that we look at change in the organization and how we also have learned very valuable lessons about keeping employees informed as we move through that process.

17:24 MS: To relate this to literally any other office or any other environment, it's an infrastructure project, what you're talking about.

17:31 CJ: Yes.

17:32 MS: You're building additional infrastructure to do your services, I suppose would be the way to rephrase that in any other situation.

17:38 CJ: Yes.

17:39 MS: How did you keep your employees aware and updated during this infrastructure building project?

17:45 CJ: So the short answer to that is not very well in the beginning.

17:48 MS: Oh.

17:49 CJ: That's why employee opinion surveys are really important. And so, fairly soon after one of the first iterations of our trail system was initiated, we did an employee opinion survey that revealed that staff had a lot of questions about exactly what we were trying to accomplish with this project, how committed we were to creating multiple trails, what the real impact and outcome would be for the animals, and whether it would actually serve the purpose that we intended which was to improve their well-being, and what we did at that time was take a serious step backward or at least pause to look at what our mechanisms were for employee communication. Everything from staff meetings to an internet site that we launched at around the same time to make sure that we were posting information and keeping people informed, and we also really started an aggressive process of making sure that we brought people in for updates and allowed for two-way communication, question and answer, and a mechanism for people to be able to provide feedback at a point in the project management where it was useful and where we still had opportunities to change design.

18:46 MS: In the 12 years that you've done this, have you developed a personal philosophy when it comes to organizational strategy or anything along those lines? What is your personal approach, if we were to sum that up?

18:58 CJ: So it's another great question. It's so hard to really put that in a nutshell. I will say that I think that my human resources philosophies have been significantly impacted and shaped by the opportunity to work on two different strategic planning processes for the zoo. So back in 2012-2013, I actually took a, what I call a tour of duty, outside of human resources altogether. I was given an opportunity to move over and work directly with our chief operating officer on our strategic plan effort as well as the opening of our Hamilton Family Children's Zoo and Faris Family Education Center, as well as our parking garage. And while those things could probably sound no less connected [chuckle] to human resources than possible...

19:37 MS: You're looking at the look on my face, I'm trying to calculate all that in my head.

19:40 CJ: It was a lot of work, and it was a time when we recognized as an organization, we needed some additional capacity on internal communication and project management, and at the time, having no experience in any of those areas, I was again given just a tremendous opportunity to support those projects. And so it was through that process that I realized the importance of developing people strategies that support the organization's long-term goals. And I think often in human resources, we tend to default to what the policy or the procedure will be that allow people to effectively work in the environment and maybe sometimes we are not looking quite far enough ahead at what we're trying to accomplish as a goal. It was a real exercise in helping me learn to be incredibly flexible in the way that I look at human resources issues, that I'm constantly thinking about how we live in the gray versus the black and white, and probably most importantly, it was a really unique opportunity to look at how, especially in a complex operation, there are very rarely one-size-fits-all solutions, and so being particularly open to the fact that everything from communication itself, meaning not every employee sits in front of a computer, certainly, what does that mean in terms of pushing out important messages, and getting people engaged in certain projects?

21:00 MS: I think that speaks a lot to the value of cross-training and cross-experiences. Does that happen often at the zoo? Do people... Obviously, there are some jobs that not everyone can learn a little bit about but do you get a lot of opportunities to experience other positions, and do you think everyone kind of knows what everyone else's responsibilities are in this little, small city that you built on the 40-acre lot?

[chuckle]

21:23 CJ: I would say that it's an area for opportunity for us, we have continued to try to find ways to almost re-orient employees, I guess, is really the right way for...

21:32 MS: Alright, that sounds fair.

21:32 CJ: To say that, that we use staff meeting time to remind everybody, this is our marketing department, and here are all the people, and this is what their roles are, because we realize over time as teams change that faces become unfamiliar to staff as they're passing each other in the garden. And the garden is what we call our public space, and so we have really tried to bring that back in front of people and I think that the internet sites certainly helped with that, having not had that program before, being able to see staff lists and pictures and departments and other bits of information has been helpful.

22:04 MS: How many people are at the zoo?

22:06 CJ: So we have a little shy of 200 full-time staff who are with us year round, and then we hire anywhere from 150 to 200 seasonal staff and then we have a substantial population of volunteers as well.

22:17 MS: Alright, good chunk of people then.

22:18 CJ: Yes. And I would say that keeping all of those people connected and again, I keep coming back to internal communication because I think it's a really important role that many of us serve in Human Resources. It's making sure that you have the ability to tailor your messages to the right audience. Not every single group is going to need the same degree of information and that goes back to my one-size-fits-all is rarely the right approach. And so being flexible and willing to really meet people where they are, in order to achieve the ultimate outcome is so important.

22:47 MS: Courtney Johnson, VP of Human Resources at the Philadelphia Zoo, thank you so much for being on the show. Thank you for being here. Say hello to Tony for me.

22:55 CJ: I will. Thank you so much.

22:56 MS: Alright.

[music]

22:56 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. For all of us at Career Minded, we'll see you next time.