

Transcript - In Conversation with Emma Birchall - Adapting to the 100-year life

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Host 00:03

Welcome to Future Talent Learnings In Conversation podcast series, where we talk to business leaders and thinkers to uncover their perspectives about the changing world of work. This episode is hosted by Future Talent Learnings, Karam Filfilan.

Karam 00:19

Today, I'm joined by Emma Birchall, Head of Insight and Forecasting at Hotspot's Movement. Hotspot's Movement is a specialist research consultancy founded by London Business School's Professor Linda Gratton, who Emma works closely with on examining the trends shaping the future of work and how business can adapt to them.

Karam 00:37

With the average life expectancy edging towards 100, Emma examines what this means for society and business. In a world where we may have to work until our 80s, what skills will we need to survive and how do we ensure we continue to get meaning and purpose in our work?

Karam 00:52

How is technology changing how we work and how can we ensure people co-create with the robots? And finally, how can business leaders navigate this bewildering future? Emma, welcome to this Changeboard Future Talent podcast.

Karam 01:04

I thought the easiest place to start would be to perhaps look at some of the research that Hotspot's does. So for instance, the theme you'll be talking about our conferences around the hundred year life. Recent research you spoke about says that someone in Japan would possibly live to 107 if they were born today.

Karam 01:19

Can you perhaps set the scene for what this kind of means for our society and for our working lives?

Emma 01:25

Absolutely. So I think to start, we always look at those statistics around babies born today in Japan will live to around, well, around half of them will live to 107, which is quite startling as a concept that age.

Emma 01:38

But first of all, it's not just about young people born today. We're all expecting to live, to far outlive our previous generations and the role models we maybe had about how we were going to live our lives.

Emma 01:49

So I certainly growing up looked at my dad and my mom and thought, okay, well, you know, that's what I can expect my life to look like. And I think the biggest, the biggest initial takeaway is that doesn't work anymore.

Emma 01:59

Our former role models of what our lives will look like and how we should sequence them, how we should provide for different stages of our life, no longer looks feasible. And we start thinking about how long we will live.

Karam 02:11

And could you expand a little bit? So when you say the structures of our life, how we traditionally kind of lived our lives, and how is it changing with this advent of the 100-year life?

Emma 02:20

So a look at my grandfather, for example, born in the mid-20s. So he was educated till around 19, 20 years of age. He then worked for around 30 years as a teacher, and then he predictably retired in his late 50s, early 60s.

Emma 02:36

And he did so in lockstep with all the other people in his generation. So broadly, him and his friends went from being educated, transitioning into work, and then finally into retirement. And that worked because the life expectancy was around

75, 80 for him, if he was lucky.

Emma 02:54

So he had maybe 15 years or so to provide for him retirement. So the systems we have in place, not only in organisations, but in terms of our government systems, our social security really were designed for a time when we had relatively short retirement periods at the end of our lives.

Emma 03:12

What we see now, if I look at my father, for example, so he retired at 62, but he's expected to live in his 90s. So that means that this generation, there's roughly almost a one-to-one ratio of working time to retire time.

Emma 03:26

Now, we think about that financially, just as a starting point, how on earth do you make that work? It's really terrifying. And when we've done the numbers on this, and a lot of the work on the 100 Year Life was done in a collaboration with Professor Linda Gratton from London Business School, and our colleague, Professor Andrew Scott, who's an economist.

Emma 03:42

So it was a fabulous combination of a psychologist and economist coming together to see how do you make those different angles of your life work really well together? What does it mean on both those frontiers?

Emma 03:54

What we see is that the saving rates that you need to have from the day you start working to the day you retire are something like 20%. If you wanted to have a one-to-one ratio of working life to retired life.

Emma 04:05

Now we know that that probably isn't going to happen. I certainly haven't saved 20% of my income from the day I started working. So first of all, we can see financially that the idea that we can keep adding all of our extra years of life expectancy into that retired leisure time at the end doesn't seem to make sense.

Emma 04:22

From a health and a social point of view, do we want to spend 35 years in retirement? Well, certainly, going back to my father, for example, he is the worst retired person I think I've ever met. So he retired and now has two jobs instead.

Emma 04:35

So now he is a night manager at Jazz Club, always his dream beyond the accountancy profession that he went into and volunteers at a theater in London. So the idea of spending 35 years or so in leisure time on the golf course isn't that inspiring.

Emma 04:51

We need to find other ways to be active, to be productive, to maintain social networks that are so important for our health. And I think just to do a bit of myth busting as well, we tend to have this idea that leisure time is uniquely and absolutely good for our health.

Emma 05:05

And of course, having leisure time is. But the social connections that work brings with it, the health implications of being retired for a very long period of time aren't necessarily positive. It's important to maintain social engagements.

Emma 05:21

There's also a social need and a personal need to add value, to have purpose for that extended period of our life.

Karam 05:29

And do you think people themselves are the ones making this change or as you said like your dad who's retired now and has gone into the jobs himself or is this at an organisational level that people start to make changes that way?

Emma 05:41

So what we see in terms of how quickly innovation happens within these spheres is that individuals start experimenting first. organisations, so companies that employ us then catch up when they start to see enough people acting outside of what they had predicted would be that behaviour.

Emma 06:00

So when they see enough people getting 65 and not wanting to retire yet, wanting to extend their career within the organisation perhaps, but not necessarily continuing to climb the ladder, maybe in a different vein, when they see a critical mass of those people changing their behaviour, changing their decisions, then they start to react.

Emma 06:17

We tend to see governments acting perhaps a bit later because they need to sign a larger scale and no government would be very popular for sharing the news about having to work till 75, 80 in terms of re-election.

Emma 06:28

So certainly I think individuals experiment first. We then see corporations and organisations catching up and then governments come a bit further down the line.

Karam 06:38

I mean that is a startling fact that people are going to be working to 80 and as you said no one's talking about it. Are there any other kind of insights and research that are kind of like that that we should be aware of and that we should be looking to change how we work?

Emma 06:50

Yeah, absolutely. So I think the biggest insight for me personally was about how you need to manage not only your tangible assets, so your, your finances in a different way, which we're, which is quite clear.

Emma 07:00

I think it's nice to have that we can see clear data, even if it's not the message we want to hear about what this means. We can see in the numbers that that won't work, but the biggest aha moment for me in this research was realising that actually it's not just those tangible assets, but it's the intangible assets that I need to manage better.

Emma 07:17

So what are intangible assets? Well, they are productivity. There are skills that keep you employable. They are vitality. So will you have the energy to keep working into, into older years? And then finally transformations.

Emma 07:31

This one is a really new concept for a lot of people, but the idea that if we're not making just those two transitions from education into work and then from work into retirement, but actually making many more transitions over a much longer working life, how do we get better at making those transitions?

Emma 07:48

So particularly if we look at traditional professions, accountancy law, those in previous years and previous generations would have been your profession and your identity for life. You joined as a bookkeeper and if you climbed the corporate ladder to the very ultimate point, maybe you left as a senior partner or a managing partner of a firm and that was your identity.

Emma 08:09

So that was nice and stable. You were an accountant. What we'll see much more of and what I completely expect to see in my own working life is the need to reinvent yourself, partly because let's face it, if I'm working for 65 years or so, if I'm not planning really to retire, but to have a long and varied working life, I'll want it to be varied.

Karam 08:28

Yeah, no one wants to, say, work in the same area for 60 years, you would have thought.

Emma 08:31

Absolutely, yeah. So you want to have that diversity of experience, but also we're seeing technological changes happening in parallel that mean we can't rely on those stable career ladders in the same way that we used to.

Emma 08:43

And again, going back to accounting and legal services, we've seen a lot of disruption in career ladders in those areas. So the more routine elements like bookkeeping or paralegal services have been heavily disrupted.

Emma 08:54

So if you were considering that to be a stable progressive linear path for the 30 to 35 year career sprint that previous generations enjoyed or did, then that would no longer work. We need to be thinking about, okay, how do I maintain skills and keep reskilling over my long working life to stay productive, to stay employable, to stay valuable?

Emma 09:18

How do I maintain my energy? How do I make sure that work is energizing? I take time to recuperate. I don't just wait for retirement to rest. I see leisure and recuperation as a thread almost that goes throughout my life.

Emma 09:29

Maybe it takes six months out every now and again. Maybe it's longer or shorter, but how do I make sure that I'm maintaining my energy reserves? And then finally, am I okay and ready to shift identities to go from being maybe my position researcher to a completely different profession that builds on the same sort of skills in the years ahead.

Karam 09:50

And that's a really key point for me. I mean, how people might have a desire to move careers or to move areas, to move industries, to move around. So for someone that's kind of started, maybe someone that's halfway through this journey, someone that's five years into a career and now they're being told, well, actually, some of the skills that you need, some of the jobs that you're doing now, they could be taken over by automation.

Karam 10:09

They could be kind of removed. You need to change, you need to update. It's almost like the digital inclusion idea, that people now need to be more savvy with technology. How do we organisationally kind of provide that for people?

Karam 10:21

What sort of skills, what sort of training can we help to help people move around?

Emma 10:26

Yeah, so I start with the concept of a job. So we focus particularly in the transition from education to employment about getting a job. What are the skills you need for that job? And to be more future-proofed in our approach, we need to think a lot more about what the skills that we need to curate over our lifetimes are valuable.

Emma 10:44

How do we continually upgrade them? Not just so that we can fulfill a job description or the next rung of the ladder in terms of job requirements. But actually, what are the skills I'm building and where can they be applied?

Emma 10:57

So much less linked to the specific job I'm doing, perhaps more linked to the cluster of people with also a similar skill set. So am I a good communicator? Do I have strong research skills? Do I have the ability to convert that research into insights rather than am I a research assistant at this particular organisation?

Emma 11:16

Because, of course, if you start looking at it in terms of skill sets, then suddenly, those three skill sets I mentioned there, I can already think of a few different jobs that they could be applied to alongside the most obvious, which is a research position.

Emma 11:31

So from the individual level, I think it's thinking much more about what the skills I'm building, what the capabilities I'm building, what am I good at, and what do I enjoy? Because, of course, you need to have the motivation to learn.

Emma 11:42

For an organisational standpoint, it's, again, thinking more flexibly in terms of what progression looks like in an organisation. And I think this comes partly from what we've just talked about, from the need to build our skills continuously over that longer working life, but also taking into account what individuals themselves need and want from work and how that's changing.

Emma 12:02

The up or out model doesn't work for everyone. However, there are very few alternatives to it in most organisations. Staying

at the same level for a long time, status-wise isn't perceived necessarily as a positive thing.

Emma 12:14

It may not even be an option. If you stay at a level for a certain period of time in some organisations, you start to become managed out. How do we, as organisations, create more horizontal moves across different levels?

Emma 12:27

How do we enable people to be skilled in completely different parts of the business so that they build those different skill sets? And how do we clearly signal that that is a route to success, a route to progression, interested in a different path?

Emma 12:39

So I think there are a couple of areas there. And actually, Japanese companies have a particularly interesting approach to this because of the lifetime employment scenario that still operates in a lot of organisations in Japan.

Emma 12:52

So the idea of, OK, well, if automation means that we don't need your job anymore, you won't work here anymore. That's not as much of an option for a lot of traditional Japanese companies. So they've had to be much more creative in terms of thinking about those lateral moves and how they think.

Karam 13:07

Is there anything particular they've done that you can kind of share or that's different to how we do things here?

Emma 13:12

I think just an openness to moving in different directions throughout the organisation and, again, with the conglomerate models. They might have a slight advantage there, but it's possible to move into different sections of the organisation rather than to be very singly aligned with my company is a technology company, for example.

Emma 13:29

Therefore, I will go from programmer to senior programmer and so on, but actually think, oh, my company has got a technology arm and perhaps a retail arm and various other elements that bring in that flexibility as a concept quite early on.

Karam 13:43

It's almost like we need to focus more on the human skills side of things rather than technical side. How do people measure that though? Because there's no kind of employability skills framework, there's no kind of way of actually measuring how well people do.

Karam 13:57

How do people show their leadership skills? Young people particularly often find it hard to kind of show those kind of areas.

Emma 14:02

Yeah, fantastic question and that's something that we've really focused on at Hotspot's movement in the last few years is to try and bring the rigor that we apply to our finances perhaps to how we think about those intangible assets of productivity, vitality and transformation.

Emma 14:16

So it's always really clear to me whether I'm drawing down on my bank account or building it up, it's very blindingly and painfully obvious. But is it as obvious when we're doing the same with our intangible assets?

Emma 14:28

So we've been experimenting with some different frameworks and surveys that help people understand the choices they're making and the consequences. And our premise isn't that at every point in your life you need to be building your productivity and vitality and transformation.

Emma 14:44

That sounds like a big ask. How can you be accelerating in your career which is what you might need in terms of building your productivity and at the same time having all this leisure time that needs to recuperate and at the same time building these networks for transformation.

Emma 14:56

So it's not that we have to be doing all those things at the same time but being much more conscious about the decisions we're making. So it's really easy particularly in a corporate world to get caught up in the pace of life, to get caught up in the predetermined ideas of success being a continual upward progression.

Emma 15:16

But taking stock of how for example have I used my time over the last six months on average. If I look back we can all look back at our diaries, our outlooks and I think okay if I'm being honest with myself I haven't seen a lot of my friends for a while as an example.

Emma 15:32

What does that mean for what my life will look like in five or ten years time? When I have to make a transition out of this role or into a different part of my life who will be supporting me if I've actually let go of some of those friendships.

Emma 15:44

So perhaps okay if you've had a particularly intensive work period are you then planning for a time when you're going to dial that down and dial up the recuperation, dial up the time to spend with family and friends.

Emma 15:58

The same with learning actually. So we ask people very simple questions about how much time do you spend learning new material and how much of that material is outside of your core competency. So continuing to learn more and more about your current role is very useful but if you do find elements of that role become automated then you're pretty much stuck in one area.

Emma 16:21

Having that curiosity about how much am I experimenting with different fields? Do I know people in other industries and other fields? Or has my network become really quite isolated which I think really happens to a lot of us over our careers.

Emma 16:33

We start out at university and we've got friends in 15 other courses and we've got psychologist friends and geographers and all sorts and then 10 years into our career we find out that all of our friends are pretty much versions of us which is very comforting and makes for some nice conversations and they're very important because they are very key to our success.

Emma 16:54

However we need to have other people in our lives that are enabling us to get insight into other industries that role model what our possible future selves could look like that might be different.

Karam 17:04

You said that changes now in business mean that people can no longer really generalise about their workforce. It's more about the individual on a one-to-one kind of level and helping those to develop.

Karam 17:13

We've also talked about the change in need and skills, the need to reskill to adapt, and the change of demographics, how we're going to work. I mean, for a HR leader or for a HR director, that's a lot to take in.

Karam 17:25

Where do they start? Where should someone start, some of these things?

Emma 17:29

Yeah, it does sound overwhelming, doesn't it, at times? So for an HR leader, I think the first point is that none of this means that we are asking leaders in HR or leaders throughout the business to understand exactly the intricacies of someone's life.

Emma 17:43

It's impossible to understand on an individual basis exactly what people need, what their diversity indicators are, for example, which is another piece of research we do about neurodiversity, how people's thinking styles are different, their family types.

Emma 17:56

There are all sorts of different areas where we all bring difference to work. And it's not necessarily leaders' role to try and

predict that or to try and diagnose that. That can actually be a bit problematic.

Emma 18:07

But what the new role for HR leaders and for leaders throughout organisations is to create that adult-to-adult environment where people can be honest about what they want their career to look like, when people can take a lot more responsibility for their learning, for example.

Emma 18:21

So there's some fantastic organisations providing learning platforms that shift HR's role from broker of training, so from a position where HR says, here are the 15 pieces of learning that you need to do to be compliant in your role, to excel in your role, to here's a platform with lots of different learning resources that we've curated.

Emma 18:43

We've got to the point where we know that they are credible and they are valuable, but also here's the opportunity to share learning between you. So we are going to enable learning rather than deliver all the learning for you.

Emma 18:57

And that means that individuals then have more responsibility for, OK, well, I'm going to try out this different course or perhaps I get a prompt to say people who have done well in my particular profession have done this course.

Emma 19:09

Maybe I'm there for more inclined to do it. We've also seen some fascinating examples from, well, from Tata Consultancy Services, one in Westpac is another, of organisations that enable people to just share their own learning.

Emma 19:22

So as an employee, I'm no longer just the recipient of learning, but I'm also a teacher.

Karam 19:27

Sounds like reverse mentoring to a degree.

Emma 19:29

Exactly, yeah, and that I can upload content that I've learned, that I want to share, that makes it much more peer-to-peer, that makes it much easier for people to see how they're building their intangible assets in that environment, and it's not just a case of here's more specific learning to do much better in your current role, but without much ability to look beyond that.

Karam 19:49

So that's some of the kind of tangible assets people can do and things that people can do to change. You know, how can how can businesses kind of future-proof themselves in this changing world then as well?

Karam 19:58

So you know, it's kind of a process and it's a slow moving area, but what can people start to do?

Emma 20:04

Well, it's a big one. So for organisations, I think the first point is to be able to access the insights around this area that it's quite it's a huge task. And we know it because we spend all day research team looking at the future of work.

Emma 20:18

But keeping up with these trends is a full time job. So some organisations that have the resources to set up future work teams, which is fantastic. Other organisations just need to be able to access those insights.

Emma 20:30

So are they are they part of a group of other companies that are also looking into this? Are they exchanging insights with other industries, with academics, with educational institutions, with government bodies, with charities?

Emma 20:42

Are they are they in the conversation, I say is the first point. So if you're an HR leader, you spend very little time out there talking to peers in different industries, different organisations about the trends impacting the future of work.

Emma 20:54

That should be a warning sign. Learning from other peers, getting that information in the first place. And then really seeing it as crafting their own future of work. This isn't deterministic. These are trends that we're mapping.

Emma 21:06

And demographics are quite a helpful one because you can broadly predict that if you have a cohort of people who are of this number of people who are 30 now, you'll probably have them 30 years later at 60.

Emma 21:17

So there's more predictability to a degree in demographic data. But it really is about crafting the organisation's future of work, understanding what they want their value proposition to be for the talent they engage with, for the communities they engage with and going from there.

Karam 21:33

On a more personal level at all, through hotspots, how do you find your research received? How easy is it to get out there and get people engaged and get people listening to it?

Emma 21:43

I think it's very easy to get people to listen to it. It's the short answer. So I find it, I don't find it difficult at all to have really fascinating conversations with organisations. I think the challenge is turning those insights into what do organisations actually do.

Emma 21:57

It's really, that's the challenging part. But it's something that we facilitate quite often with organisations. So helping people distill the universe of the future of work into, okay, what does this mean for my company?

Emma 22:11

Have we sat down and thought about how each of these trends might impact us? If we project our organisation forward 20 years perhaps, or even just 10 years, what might our workforce look like? What might work look like and how we do it?

Emma 22:26

So who will the people be, what will they be doing and how will they be doing it? And the three questions that I tend to ask organisations when we consult with them, when we do workshops, to really help think about what, it's not just being a recipient of the future of work and then responding, it's crafting that future of work and being on the front foot will be really important.

Karam 22:44

And if it's not too much of a kind of a personal question, I mean, how do you see this impact on your own career, your own life, you know, how do you deal with this as an individual?

Emma 22:53

Yeah. So I think the first is that I don't really expect to retire. So I have to, I have to take that. Genuinely, I think when I was doing some of the research with Linda on the hundred year life, it was quite an emotional journey.

Emma 23:09

So when we started out, I was looking at the data and thinking, Oh my goodness, how on earth is this going to work for people of my generation? And then as we progressed the research, then we saw the hopefulness of it and the excitement around it, because let's face it, living for longer has got to be a good thing.

Emma 23:24

We have to, as humans, be inventive enough to make the gift of longer life into a gift and not see it as a curse. I mean, it's a bizarre idea that we would look at longer life as something to dread. And I think on a personal level, what it's, it's woken me up to is what do I want my life to look like?

Emma 23:43

And rather than just thinking about jobs in a discreet way. And also thinking about the range of, of what I can bring in my future that's uniquely human. So when we think about technology impacting work, we talk often about uniquely human skills.

Emma 23:58

So the skills that technology won't displace as readily. So things like collaboration, innovation, and so on. And when I thought about being a researcher, I was like, you know, actually this isn't a, isn't even research isn't a future proofed area.

Emma 24:10

There is still a lot of technological augment augmentations there, that just knowing the information and being able to compile insights and, and create new concepts that in itself isn't particularly future proofed.

Emma 24:24

What is future proofed is the storytelling around that, how you engage individuals in that story, how you engage organisations to sit up and take notice of it and feel empowered to do something differently.

Emma 24:34

So one example is that I developed a hobby of improvisational theater to get better at storytelling. So that, okay, well, if that's going to be a uniquely human skill, I've got to get my job is to build up a parallel skill set in how I communicate these insights, not just how I find them, which, which lots of people can do.

Emma 24:54

And actually we'll see augmented computer augmentation doing increasingly. How do I get better at telling those stories and making them meaningful? So I spend at least three, four hours a week doing improvisational theater classes and performing in front of theater, which is for those of you who haven't had the joy, is going on, going on to a stage without a script with between one other person and five other people and creating a story completely in the moment.

Emma 25:18

So it means thinking very quickly on your feet. It means trusting your instincts. It means listening really well, because if you don't listen very well to your scene partner, you'll find yourself stuck.

Emma 25:29

So it tests out all those very uniquely human skills that are crucial in, I think, future proofing my own career.

Karam 25:37

Emma, thank you very much for joining us.

Emma 25:38

Thank you.

Host 25:44

You've been listening to Future Talent Learning's In Conversation podcast. Thank you for joining us. If you've enjoyed this episode, please check out the other conversations we're having with leaders and thinkers about the changing world of work.