

Susan Fronk, President and CEO of MRA - The Management Association dives into the history of MRA and its mission of helping businesses thrive. Fronk opens up into her personal and professional background, the greatest business challenges heading into the year, the benefits of 30 Minute THRIVE, and more.

### Listen to Discover:

- Over the past 38 years that Susan has been with MRA, she has seen a lot of changes. Main changes include: complexity and regulations HR professionals need to be aware of
- Good leaders paint a vivid picture of the future, make sure there isn't uncertainty, and communicate clearly
- Key business concerns: Comp trends, talent acquisition, talent retention (consider lowering your turnover and becoming that employer of choice. Provide what employers and employees need and you have fewer spots to fill! Employee retention may be even more important than talent acquisition

### Transcript:

Intro | 00:00:00:01 - 00:00:23:02

Hello, hello everybody, and welcome to 30 minute THRIVE—your go-to podcast for anything and everything HR, powered by MRA - The Management Association. Looking to stay on top of the ever-changing world of HR? MRA has got you covered. We'll be the first to tell you what's hot and what's not. I'm your host, Sophie Boler, and we are so glad you're here. Now it's time to THRIVE.

Sophie Boler | 00:00:23:13 - 00:00:31:14

I am joined with Susan Fronk, president and CEO of MRA. Good morning, Susan. It's great to have you on.

Susan Fronk | 00:00:31:17 - 00:00:33:13

And it's great to be here. I'm looking forward to it.

Sophie Boler | 00:00:33:13 - 00:00:41:18

Good. Me, too. Well, as we dive in, I thought it would be a good start to start at your journey here at MRA. So how long have you been here?

Susan Fronk | 00:00:42:01 - 00:01:07:09

Well, I've been at MRA most of my professional life, and I hurried through college, was fortunate to be hired by a large manufacturer—2,200 employees, five plants, three bargaining units, 74 general foremen. They were all men at the time, and I was the factory employment supervisor, so I had a lot of on-the-job training. I worked for great bosses.

Susan Fronk | 00:01:07:17 - 00:01:27:05

That doesn't always mean friendly bosses, or the nicest bosses. They were bosses who expect a lot out of me and gave me a lot of feedback so that I could do my job and be the best that I could be in human resources. So that was a really exciting time. And, you know, I learned to love manufacturing and I still do to this day.

Susan Fronk | 00:01:27:07 - 00:01:43:15

I love seeing what our members do and I really honored and respected the people that I hired into the plant and the people that I supported with human resource services. It was a great foundation for then moving to MRA.

Sophie Boler | 00:01:43:21 - 00:01:48:02

Absolutely. And you've been here for 38 years. That's pretty impressive.

Susan Fronk | 00:01:48:08 - 00:01:53:02

I don't want to ask how old you are. And before you were born, I'm pretty sure.

Sophie Boler | 00:01:53:03 - 00:01:59:17

Thirty-eight years is very impressive. So I would like to know what you started out as, at MRA; what role were you in?

Susan Fronk | 00:01:59:20 - 00:02:21:05

Well, it's kind of funny, actually, because I was employee 16 and I was the "labor guy." That was what I was hired to do. I was labor guy and I had just a few years of experience. So when I came on board, I was on the Human Resource Hotline, which is one of our most favorite and valued member benefits still today.

Susan Fronk | 00:02:21:15 - 00:02:46:20

I wrote content for our publications. I stepped into the classroom to do HR training. So, much less specialized and much more of a generalist. And I kind of loved that—it played to my strengths and I got to do a little bit of everything. But as labor guy, which was not on my business cards, but that's what I was, I worked with a lot of our members, primarily manufacturing.

Susan Fronk | 00:02:47:06 - 00:02:55:06

If they had employee relations issues or specifically labor issues, I was the go-to and I loved that.

Sophie Boler | 00:02:55:12 - 00:03:08:14

Right. Like you said, it's pretty inspiring that you've got to experience each component that makes up MRA. So you've been here for 38 years, like we said. So you've seen the ins and outs of the organization.

Susan Fronk | 00:03:08:16 - 00:03:09:02

I have.

Sophie Boler | 00:03:09:05 - 00:03:14:07

What is the biggest change that you've seen in HR since you started, as that labor guy.

Susan Fronk | 00:03:14:11 - 00:03:43:17

Where to begin? If you don't mind, I'd like to flip that question and first tell you one constant. The constant, whether it was the first day I started here or today, is that you can't have a great company without a really great human resource team. I have never seen an inspiring, rapid-growth, get it all right in the headlines for the right reasons

Susan Fronk | 00:03:44:02 - 00:04:10:01

kind of organization, if they didn't have a really good, strong, proactive leaderly kind of human resource team. So that's been a constant. So what has changed, and what hasn't changed? Everything else has changed about human resources. But if I pull back from the details, I would say one thing is the complexity of the body of knowledge.

Susan Fronk | 00:04:10:22 - 00:04:42:05

Human resource people, when I began in HR, it wasn't nearly as difficult to get your arms around everything that you needed to know—the complexity and interconnectedness of federal regulations, state regulations, sometimes down to county and municipal differences, coordinating all of those, varying expectations of employees, having five generations in the workforce. I mean, that's all completely different. And then you add to that just the pace of change.

Susan Fronk | 00:04:42:08 - 00:05:17:07

So that's not peculiar to HR. It's business in general. Business is moving so fast with the advent of different technology and global business and mobile employees. All of those things just create the need to be very agile and kind of be able to pivot very quickly, which creates not only stress and anxiety for employees—because fear and anxiety, stress in employees makes the company less productive,

Susan Fronk | 00:05:17:07 - 00:05:39:15

it also isn't good for your team. You want to make sure you know where you're going. But human resources is at the vortex of all that. They have to deal with the pace of change. They need to support the team so that the team can support the organization and all of that in a much faster pace than 10 years ago or 20 years ago.

Sophie Boler | 00:05:40:12 - 00:05:58:22

And I think MRA's ability to consistently stay on top of those business nature trends and changes is something that really sets us apart from others and something that I really admire about the company. So that being said, what is something that you really love about MRA? I know there's probably a lot.

Susan Fronk | 00:05:59:18 - 00:06:31:19

There's a million things, but we only have 30 minutes. So I guess I would say I love the way that I feel every day because I feel privileged to look through the windows of hundreds and literally thousands of members that we serve. They have trust and confidence in us. They turn to us for help with some of their thorniest people and productivity problems,

Susan Fronk | 00:06:31:19 - 00:07:10:17

and I take that responsibility really seriously. And I hope that I am still that sense of responsibility and trust and feeling honored to be invited in with everybody who works at MRA. But that's one thing I love: the fact that it's way beyond me. It's way beyond anybody who works here. It's about supporting great businesses so that they can be good employers, so that they can have a strong workforce, so that the people who work there can earn a good wage in a safe environment, to be motivated and support themselves and their families.

Susan Fronk | 00:07:11:19 - 00:07:35:17

We may do that in a tiny way, but I always see it as kind of ripples on the pond, and it radiates out. When you have good employers who have good, sustainable jobs, you have a good team, you have a strong community—that helps everybody. So being part of that bigger purpose is something I love and not a trait throwaway line.

Susan Fronk | 00:07:35:20 - 00:07:48:01

I love our members, I really do. I love learning about our members and the myriad things that they do. And that energizes me every day.

Sophie Boler | 00:07:48:06 - 00:08:02:13

Right. And that's what MRA is all about. Well, we know that MRA work makes up a big portion of your life and it is probably one of your greatest joys. But what's one of your greatest joys outside of MRA?

Susan Fronk | 00:08:04:17 - 00:08:05:22

When I'm not working, you say.

Sophie Boler | 00:08:05:22 - 00:08:06:12

When you are not working.

Susan Fronk | 00:08:08:00 - 00:08:42:23

I'm kidding. I do try to have a work-life balance. I would say just like every other human resource or CEO leader in the last 2 years, it's a little out of whack right now, but we're moving back into the lane, right, as a global community. We're moving back into a more normal way. So when I'm not working, I think a lot of members may know that I own a farm and love hosting our new employees and managers at our farm to do a rookie reception and have fun and relax, and do that.

Susan Fronk | 00:08:42:23 - 00:08:50:19

I love nature. I love animals. So I'm really a farm girl at heart.

Sophie Boler | 00:08:51:04 - 00:08:51:18

I love it.

Susan Fronk | 00:08:52:00 - 00:09:20:19

I know, I do, too! And that's oftentimes hard work, but a completely different kind of work than the brainpower and focus you put at work. I think it was Teddy Roosevelt who said, I might have that wrong, but I think it was Teddy Roosevelt who said, "The outside of a horse is good for the inside of a man." I would paraphrase that for today's vernacular and just say working with animals and nature is really good for the soul.

Susan Fronk | 00:09:20:19 - 00:09:43:06

Or at least it is for me. It's so different and you clean a stall and you're completely done. HR people can never say that. They can never say, "I'm done, I'm clocking out, I'm going home at the end of the day"—that just never happens. So office administrative, and intellectual leader work is very different than farm work. So I love my farm.

Susan Fronk | 00:09:43:19 - 00:10:01:18

My family—I have three young adult children. Seeing them learning and launching into life has been a joy. Some members also know that I met my husband through MRA, at an HR conference almost 30 years ago.

Sophie Boler | 00:10:01:18 - 00:10:03:05

Of course!

Susan Fronk | 00:10:03:06 - 00:10:23:15

Right! Spare me all the jokes about MRA being a full-service association because I've heard 'em all and it goes even deeper than that. Most people don't know that my youngest brother, who I just saw this weekend, he lives in Pennsylvania. He met his wife through MRA because she was our survey manager. And before that, our compensation intern.

Susan Fronk | 00:10:24:01 - 00:10:46:21

And so they met on the MRA softball team. So we truly ...

... and they've been married for 26 years. So it's like, what do you need? We do it all! Maybe that's a side business. Maybe that's a side business we should do. So my joy is my farm. And just as a little sidebar, some people through either knowing me or through our DE&I

Susan Fronk | 00:10:47:00 - 00:11:11:20

probably 5 or 6 years ago when I opened, I talked about trees and how I love trees. I plant trees every year—one, two, five, 10, whatever it is—they memorialize people that have gone before me. They'll be here long after I'm gone. And with just a little bit of care, they provide joy, shade, beauty, and oxygen.

Susan Fronk | 00:11:12:10 - 00:11:19:18

At that DE&I conference then we had on the table tiny little seedlings that they could take home and plant.

Sophie Boler | 00:11:20:03 - 00:11:22:16

That's an awesome idea!

Susan Fronk | 00:11:22:16 - 00:11:24:14

Right, so I have two trees on order I'm planting.

Sophie Boler | 00:11:24:16 - 00:11:28:07

Oh yeah that's awesome. I love that that's your greatest joy.

Susan Fronk | 00:11:28:07 - 00:11:29:23

You didn't know I love trees but I do.

Sophie Boler | 00:11:30:00 - 00:11:36:00

I didn't. And I knew you loved horses. And I've actually gotten a chance to meet the horses and feed them.

Susan Fronk | 00:11:36:00 - 00:11:48:00

And truth be told, I like cows even better than horses. But yes ...

... my two cows died of old age. And I need to ... and that's what I asked for, for Mother's Day.

Sophie Boler | 00:11:48:00 - 00:11:49:13

A cow!

Susan Fronk | 00:11:49:00 - 00:11:52:22

Yes. Two. I don't want them to be lonely.

Sophie Boler | 00:11:52:22 - 00:12:06:12

Oh, my gosh. I love that. Now, switching gears a little, unfortunately, but I'm curious about the opposite question. And we often ask our members what keeps them up at night. So what keeps you up at night?

Susan Fronk | 00:12:06:15 - 00:12:51:22

I think I'm like a lot of other leaders and I wouldn't say just CEOs, but maybe most especially CEOs, because if you're a good leader, you never pass the buck. You know you're responsible for everything that happens in your organization and the experience that your employees and your customers have. It's on your desk. So the last few years, I think I'm in the mainstream in that I'm really worried about my organization, most specifically, my people, the people who work here going through a pandemic, and all the different struggles that foisted on all businesses.

Susan Fronk | 00:12:53:02 - 00:13:16:23

Again, back to that, I learned so much from our members and I am really inspired by them. You know, the headlines you read in the paper about business are oftentimes more negative than positive. And that's just not the reality of it. That's not the reality I see with thousands of companies. There are stinkers out there, no doubt—none of our members—but most leaders, whether they're CEOs or HR

Susan Fronk | 00:13:17:00 - 00:13:44:09

managers or plant managers or accounting managers, whatever they are, they lost sleep and spent a lot of time saying, "How can I take care of my team? How can I make this work for my organization? How can I make sure we come out of this strongly?" And I saw leaders, you know, ruin their health, their marriage, their peace of mind, whatever it was, because the buck should stop here.

Sophie Boler | 00:13:44:13 - 00:13:58:17

Right. And a lot of business challenges are, like you said, what keeps members, leaders, everyone, up at night. But what do you see as the greatest business challenge heading into this next year?

Susan Fronk | 00:13:58:17 - 00:14:25:08

Well, first, I guess I would say this is very nebulous, but I'll explain. Nature abhors a vacuum. I didn't say that. I don't know who said it, but I'm repeating it. Nature abhors a vacuum. So when there's a vacuum in nature, thoughts, other things, opposite forces, opinions—they flood in. They might or might not be accurate or support the direction we're trying to go.

Susan Fronk | 00:14:25:08 - 00:14:57:05

So I would say uncertainty that has been created by, yes, the pandemic, but supply chain disruption, unprecedented inflation, the talent shortage, you know, with no end in sight for some things, businesses are worried about how do I, how do I make a plan? How do I determine these strategies will work? How do I reduce the fear and anxiety of my team?

Susan Fronk | 00:14:57:05 - 00:15:22:14

Because if you can't paint a vivid picture of the future, if you can't, if you can't say this is your place in it, people will not allow you to lead them anywhere. You have to reduce that fear and anxiety. And with so much uncertainty in the business world, I would say that's high on the list of most leaders' goals and objectives.

Susan Fronk | 00:15:22:21 - 00:15:32:21

I need to make sure there isn't uncertainty, that we're communicating clearly, and that we bring our whole team with us no matter what the future holds.

Sophie Boler | 00:15:33:10 - 00:15:57:17

And a lot of the challenges that you just mentioned, we're going to be having topics on in the near future in the podcast. So we'll get to know more about those and cover them. But as we head into the next year, is there a motivational story that you can point out from a member or something that can, you know, give us more motivation for this next year coming up?

Susan Fronk | 00:15:57:23 - 00:16:40:20

Sure. It's true that good leaders don't beat their chest and say, "I am so much" or "I know so much." Usually, there are people who say, "I learned so much" and they just keep learning and adapting and adjusting and sharing it with others. So there are many inspiring things that I've seen our members do. But one conversation during the "great recession,"—so 2009—was in my CEO Roundtable, and he's a very soft-spoken, conservative CEO,

Susan Fronk | 00:16:40:20 - 00:17:02:02

and everyone around the table was saying, "How do you plan with this? How could you possibly put together a strategic plan? And I don't know if it's right. And what if it's wrong and I'm doing this, but you're doing that?" And there was just a lot of wailing and gnashing of teeth. Again, I was right there with them saying, "Oh, my gosh, how do we do this?"

Susan Fronk | 00:17:02:13 - 00:17:18:15

And he just very quietly spoke and he said, "Stop." He said, "There is no perfect decision. There is no perfect plan. Run your damn business," and people burst out laughing

Susan Fronk | 00:17:18:15 - 00:17:20:17

because it just wasn't expected from him.

Susan Fronk | 00:17:21:01 - 00:17:53:08

And I used that. I know, I know. I didn't even swear. But that's just so perfect. At times you get tangled up, you know, you get paralyzed with fear or the uncertainty saying, I don't know what to do. You know, business leaders are expected to make it happen anyway and still work with realism—kind of left brain left/right brain—use data, use facts, use numbers, and then use your right brain and educated judgment.

Susan Fronk | 00:17:53:08 - 00:18:09:18

So you've got the analytics and you've got the good judgment and you need to move ahead. If you stand in the middle of the road, you're going to get run over. And the fact of the matter is, with the pace of business, you can change. Go back to great communications and bringing your team with you.

Susan Fronk | 00:18:09:18 - 00:18:28:12

But adjustment, agility—that's the name of the game today. So don't be paralyzed from stepping forward and advancing. Have a good, clear purpose and logic coupled with good judgment, and keep communicating about those things. So run your damn business.

Sophie Boler | 00:18:28:21 - 00:18:32:01

I love all the analogies. It helps.

Susan Fronk | 00:18:32:02 - 00:18:34:18

I've learned so much from my members.

Sophie Boler | 00:18:35:10 - 00:18:43:12

We've discussed a lot so far. And I just have a couple more questions. I think the main one is how does this podcast benefit others?

Susan Fronk | 00:18:44:02 - 00:19:08:01

Well, I hope that they would find it as a go-to, that in the human resource profession, life is moving very fast. I listen to podcasts—I call it windshield time. I can still focus on my driving and listen to something I find interesting. And MRA has an army of human resource and business professionals that work here.

Susan Fronk | 00:19:08:13 - 00:19:41:21

I'm energized by them, too. And they bring more than 2,000 years of experience to bear on their topics. So it's really a good collective and that makes it very powerful. We learn from our members, we see best practices, we do umpteen surveys and we really know what's going on in the business community where people and productivity are concerned, and then you add the expertise of our army of 230 employees and together we serve up information that's relevant, timely, helpful, valuable.

Susan Fronk | 00:19:41:21 - 00:20:03:19

You know, at the end of the day, I tell our members, it's our job to save you time and money. And so we help them do their jobs better and faster because that's what this world is requiring. I would say one more thing: Especially through the pandemic, maybe always, but especially true the last 2 years, HR people have been like first responders.

Susan Fronk | 00:20:04:08 - 00:20:40:10

That's what I've seen in our business community. HR people needed to take the COVID call at 10 o'clock at night to deal with talent shortages, to show up for strategic planning, prepared, ready to go in. It was a lot. And I think HR people serve others maybe to the detriment of serving themselves sometimes. So I see this podcast as one way to give back a little booster, to give back information and something that they can find helpful and useful and maybe a little uplifting in their day, where they can take care of their own professional development.

Sophie Boler | 00:20:40:16 - 00:20:45:08

Absolutely. And we're going to cover a lot of different topics, which I'm very excited about.

Susan Fronk | 00:20:45:08 - 00:20:45:23

I am too.

Sophie Boler | 00:20:45:23 - 00:20:50:03

Are there any topics that you are particularly excited about?

Susan Fronk | 00:20:50:03 - 00:21:22:19

Compensation this year. Nobody can find or keep the talent that they need. You know, everybody's heard the "great resignation," but there's also the "great reset" going on—people changing careers completely, maybe deciding to do something or move somewhere. So there's just a lot of turmoil in the talent marketplace right now. Compensation is a part of that because compensation is just table stakes.

Susan Fronk | 00:21:23:11 - 00:21:53:18

I've heard it and I believe it. Compensation is table stakes because if you pay somebody competitively, that doesn't mean they're going to stay. But if you don't pay somebody competitively, they will leave. So you have to get that right as just a threshold baseline of good human resource practice. And this year, with inflation and the talent shortage and a lot of other paradigm shifts, our members are intensely interested in compensation.

Susan Fronk | 00:21:53:18 - 00:22:27:11

So our compensation trends program on the 15th has a record number of attendees and we're still 2 weeks away. We have 1,100 members registered. That says this is really a hot topic and so our presenters are very skilled. They see the landscape through our surveys and through thousands of conversations with members and they're going to bring that to bear so that our members who tune in can get the information they need to carry back and try to get that equation right in their own organizations.

Susan Fronk | 00:22:27:21 - 00:22:53:06

And so comp trends in talent acquisition, talent retention. You know, people always think about I can't hire someone, but if you can lower your turnover, if you become that employer of

choice and provide what employers and employees need, you have fewer spots to fill, right? So employee retention may be even more important than talent acquisition, but they are two sides of the same coin.

Susan Fronk | 00:22:53:06 - 00:23:00:16

So I would be excited, and I think our members will be very interested, in compensation topics and talent acquisition workforce strategies.

Sophie Boler | 00:23:00:21 - 00:23:13:10

Absolutely. I'm excited to cover that topic too. So we've talked a little bit about this, but the podcast is open to both nonmembers and members. But what is the true benefit to members of MRA?

Susan Fronk | 00:23:14:11 - 00:23:51:23

Well, we honor our members and we partner with them closely. So we want to make sure that we always, although the podcast is open to everyone, to learn a little bit about us and become better practitioners and business leaders, we do save some special things for our members only and some of the things that we have that are being worked on this year and will be rolled out later, but still in 2022, like our learning management system, new technology for our wage and salary surveys and really responding to the need to be faster. Compensation,

Susan Fronk | 00:23:51:23 - 00:24:14:06

when you're aging data a year—that feels like an eon ago, right? So we wanted to make it less a point in time and more evergreen and organic, so our members always get the latest information, at the same time working on MRA's back office transactional kind of things to make sure when a member works with MRA, they're hitting the easy button.

Sophie Boler | 00:24:15:00 - 00:24:18:04

Well, Susan, thank you so much for joining us today. I had a blast!

Susan Fronk | 00:24:18:04 - 00:24:19:14

Me too!

Sophie Boler | 00:24:19:22 - 00:24:42:00

And we'll see you next time to continue the conversation on compensation trends.

Outro | 00:24:42:12 - 00:24:46:19

And that wraps up our content for this episode. Be sure to reference the show notes where you can sign up to connect for more podcast updates. Check out other MRA episodes on your favorite podcast platform and as always, make sure to follow MRA's 30 minute THRIVE so you don't miss out. Thanks for tuning in and we'll see you next Wednesday to carry on the HR conversation.