

**Description:** This week, MRA's Vice President of Human Resources, James McDevitt uses his 25+ years of HR knowledge to discuss what it takes to create your path to success! He covers ladders vs. lattices, core competencies, employee development tools, and more.

**Listen to Discover:**

- Employees are generally more engaged when they believe their employer is concerned about their growth, provides opportunities to reach individual career goals, and allows them to contribute to the company's success.
- Some paradigms have also shifted, making career paths even more important. Workers value job enrichment, flexibility, and career development more than job security and stability.
- Frame the career path discussion to include regular development conversations within the performance management cycle!

**Transcript:**

*Transcripts are computer generated -- not 100% accurate word-for-word.*

00:00:00:02 - 00:00:23:03

Intro

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.

00:00:23:14 - 00:00:46:03

Sophie Boler

Hello, everybody, and welcome to this episode of 30 minute THRIVE. We're so glad you're here and joining us today. And today, James McDevitt is also joining us today. He's our vice president of human resources here at MRA. And he's really here to discuss, give advice on career paths. So thanks for being here today, James.

00:00:46:04 - 00:00:47:00

James McDevitt

Thank you for inviting me.

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Sophie Boler

Excited to talk with you. But before we get started, we really want to start with a fun question. And as our listeners know, we're located in Wisconsin, and we had our first true snowfall yesterday, which was crazy. So I want to ask you what your favorite thing to do in the winter, wintertime activity is.

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James McDevitt

I actually love taking my wee Westie, our little pet West Highland Terrier, out for a walk in the snow. He loves the snow. He's white, so you can't see him very well. But he loves when it's really deep, and he's only got little legs. He jumps across the snow and he loves hunting deer and squirrels and whatever's out there.

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James McDevitt

He just has a great time.

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Sophie Boler

That's just funny to hear—a small little Westie hunting a big deer.

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James McDevitt

Oh, yeah. Yeah, for sure.

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Sophie Boler

Small but mighty.

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James McDevitt

Absolutely.

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Sophie Boler

Well, that's great. But let's dive into our topic for today, and that is career paths. And we're going to start a little broad. So can you tell me what the difference between an organizational career path and a personal career path is?

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James McDevitt

Sure. Great question to start with. They're definitely related; however, as the name implies, organizational career path is more work related than personal career path. It's more personal related. So you're looking at, for a personal career path, you're looking at development skills, sorry, skills that you need to develop for yourself. Maybe the softer skills, maybe time management skills, maybe dealing with people, managing people, leading people, getting people motivated, engaged, etc., whereas a traditional organizational career path would be more job related.

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James McDevitt

How do I want to, maybe I want to be CEO one day. How do I become CEO? What jobs do I need to do? What skills do I need to learn? So the personal career path also would include what do you enjoy doing? What do you like doing? Do you like working with people? So you may want to consider a career with people that would help enable that.

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James McDevitt

Do you like building things? Do you like working with computers? These are all different things that you would bring into either a personal plan or an organizational plan.

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Sophie Boler

Absolutely. And I would imagine that those two plans would kind of overlap at some point.

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James McDevitt

They would. They're absolutely intertwined. They're not mutually exclusive at all.

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Sophie Boler

Sure. Can we also talk about how you can find and really define your career path? How do you get started?

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James McDevitt

So this is unique to everybody out there in podcast land. Everybody is different. Everyone has their unique talents, objectives, interests, personal circumstances. And the best way to start really is to think about what interests you, what gets you out of bed in the morning, what excites you. And as I said earlier, if you love working with people, then you're going to think about a career within that field that enables you to do that.

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James McDevitt

If you like building things or analyzing data to find patterns, then to each their own, everybody's different. So every career path by definition will be different depending on the individual. And then once you find what excites you and what interests you, research the types of jobs that are in those fields that will enable you to fulfill that passion. Know the requirements and know the requirements for the roles.

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James McDevitt

Do you need a degree, for example. If you do need to college certificate, a college degree, what in?

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Sophie Boler

Right.

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James McDevitt

Is an associate's degree sufficient? Do you need a full bachelor's degree? Do you need a postgraduate degree? What about certifications? What about experience? These are all the things to think about. It's all great. I love working with people—yay! —but what does that actually mean? And what do I need to do to build my experience to make me employable in that field?

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James McDevitt

And the other thing I would say is you can do it at any time in your life, at any time in your career. We're not all defined by what we decided to do when we were 14 and met with our school careers counselor. Some people just drift into work and drift into school and they find a career and they land on their feet and everything's fine.

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James McDevitt

So other people do that, and then 5, 10, 15 years later they go, "I don't really want to do this anymore." And that's okay. You can change your career at any time. You can define your career path at any time. I actually did something like that in my mid- to late-20s where I wasn't particularly satisfied in the role I was in.

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James McDevitt

And I sat down and thought about what do I really want to do when I grow up? And I decided what I wanted to do, which was different, I decided I did the research well, what do I need to get into that field? I needed to get some qualification. So I went to night school. I got the qualifications, I switched careers.

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James McDevitt

And here we are a number of years later.

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Sophie Boler

Yeah, that's a great example to bring up. And I like how you kind of emphasize that a career path doesn't have to be set in stone. It can change. Absolutely. And it's unique to everybody, you know, depending on what they like to do and maybe something they want they want to test out. But moving on, can you talk a little bit more about core competencies and how this really relates to career paths?

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James McDevitt

Absolutely. So core competencies are really the key skill sets that you need to do a job, whatever they may be. They can be technical by nature. I need to learn a skill to do a specific task, or they may be a little bit softer, such as the ability to do a podcast for MRA.

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Sophie Boler

I think that that's a pretty tough skill.

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James McDevitt

In a previous organization—and I think it is a good example of how core competencies work—in a previous organization, which was a research facility, we identified core competencies for our technical staff and we have different types of research required, different type of skills. But we identify four key core competencies that if you're a technician, if you need if you learn how to do these four competencies, you could actually work in any of the research fields.

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James McDevitt

And so we established the four key competencies and everybody was trained in those four key competencies, core competencies. So that meant that they could work across the organization as and when needed, which made it more interesting for them because they were not doing the same thing day in and day out and from an organizational point of view made it much more flexible.

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James McDevitt

We then identified further key core competencies in each of the specific research fields. So if you were going to specialize in research X, then you got training on the additional core competencies next. So that helped develop someone's skills, someone's expertise, and obviously met our, at that time, our customer needs by having skilled technicians work on that project.

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Sophie Boler

Absolutely. So we talked a little bit about career paths in general, but what about nontraditional career paths? Is there anything else you want to address with that?

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James McDevitt

So the nontraditional career path could be defined as something that is traditionally filled by a specific gender. So, for example, engineering is traditionally identified as a male profession. So if a woman wanted to go into engineering, that would be considered a nontraditional. Likewise for men in nursing, nursing is considered a traditional female profession. So if you are a man wanting to be in nursing, that would be a nontraditional role.

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James McDevitt

They also expand beyond that, could be an individual who decides to follow their passion in a different way. So instead of working in finance or working in HR, you might want to do something completely different. And especially with the younger generations these days and the advance of the internet and technologies and the gig economy, etc., there's a lot of people out there following nontraditional career paths, being an influencer, traveling the world and recording video and getting sponsorship, and all that kind of good stuff.

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James McDevitt

So not everybody needs to be in finance or HR or be an engineer. There's certainly these days a lot of nontraditional career paths out there for people. But the key, again, is to find what interests you.

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James McDevitt

Follow your passion.

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Sophie Boler

Yeah. And we actually have a nontraditional candidate podcast coming up in just the importance of tapping into those nontraditional candidates. So can you talk a little bit about the difference between career paths and career ladders?

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James McDevitt

Sure. So a career ladder—we'll start there—is the traditional, very specific, like the rung of a ladder. You go from 1, 2, 3—technician 1, technician 2, technician 3, for example—fairly straight, as a ladder is, and so very linear. A career path is broader, broader by definition. It can include a comprehensive career path, may include promotions, but also lateral moves.

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James McDevitt

And we'll touch on this in a minute. But a previous organization I worked with was very keen on promoting broad career paths. Which meant so you're not necessarily going to go from 1 to 2 to 3. You're going to be looking at what skills do you need to learn in order to progress within the organization, in order to add value to the organization.

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James McDevitt

And that may mean a lateral move. It may mean a temporary assignment somewhere learning a different part of the business. So a broad career path is much broader than a much more strict career ladder.

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Sophie Boler

And then going off of that, what is the difference between the career ladder, which we just talked about, and a lattice?

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James McDevitt

Right. So a new term for me anyway, recently. But it's pretty much like what I said in terms of a broad career path. I think many people think a linear career path, as I said—1, 2, 3. But the lattice is more of a zigzag approach. You can go sideways in order to move forward. You can go sideways.

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James McDevitt

You can learn new skills within the organization. As I said, in the previous organization I was in, that was the way to advance yourself. It was very few people went 1, 2, 3, now that's it, you're good. You really were encouraged to learn different parts of the business. You were encouraged to learn different skills. Temporary assignments were encouraged. It was a global organization.



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James McDevitt

Overseas assignments were encouraged. Now that model is clearly easier to carry out in a larger organization where there are multiple opportunities; however, in a smaller organization we should think about that as well because it's harder to do—you're not going to send somebody overseas if you've got three locations in Wisconsin— but at the same time, you can also be thinking about those three locations if they're different products, for example, or different services they offer.

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James McDevitt

Well, if James is potentially a high-talent individual with a goal to be a successor to a leader one day, well, sending James to the facility in the other part of Wisconsin for a year to learn that business could be a really good move. It won't necessarily be a promotion, it won't necessarily be more money. But I would be learning something valuable for the organization and developing my skill set at the same time.

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Sophie Boler

Absolutely. I think, like you just said, it depends on size of the company, your career path, your personal career path, your goals and intentions, whether you take a more lateral move or you do a ladder like you talked about. So how does making employee development a priority benefit the organization as well?

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James McDevitt

I think this is a, it's a no-brainer, really, from an organizational point of view. The cliché is true: If an organization doesn't develop and doesn't grow and doesn't evolve, it will eventually stagnate, probably die. And there's lots of companies out there that we could quote that unfortunately have carried out that business cycle. So how does a company evolve and how does a company grow organically?

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James McDevitt

It grows through its people. And if the employees grow and develop new skills, improve their experiences, bring new ideas to the organization, whether they learn internally or they learn from external means, they're bringing those ideas to the organization that can lead to new product development. It can lead to new, efficient, more effective processes. It can improve the bottom line and could improve the commercial side of the organization, and the company continues to evolve



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James McDevitt

as the employees continue to evolve, the two go hand in hand. It's a bit of a no-brainer.

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Sophie Boler

And I think in terms of just attracting employees, too, I think speaking of the young, the younger generation side, I think employee development is something that is just very attractive when it comes to picking an organization.

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James McDevitt

It is. It is. Some people are very happy coming in and doing what they do and going home again and that's fine. I mention if you want to be a CEO earlier— not everybody wants to be a CEO and that's completely fine. However, for many people, they're looking to maintain that interest. They want to come, again they want to have a reason for getting out of bed and coming to work in the morning and doing the same thing day in and day out doesn't float too many boats.

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James McDevitt

So we're looking for employees to have an interest, learn new things, be curious, to develop their skill set, to sharpen their soul. And that's where personal development comes in. And the win for the businesses, as I said, if you're developing new skills and you're thinking of new ways of doing things, you can you can improve a process and save time and money to get the product out the door.

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James McDevitt

You can bring in new product development, new ideas to go to market, different ways to market things. And that's not some entity known as the corporation. That's people who do that. It's the people that work for you who are developing their skills, who are bringing new ideas and bringing new products to market. And that's how the company works.

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Sophie Boler

That's a great point to bring up. So you are vice president of HR here at MRA, like we said. So what role does HR play in helping develop their employees and their career path?

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James McDevitt

Absolutely. So HR among other groups such as the employees' manager, we all have a role to play. We are the coach with a mentor. We can we can explain some of the things that the employee may not know about. But the key point I want to emphasize is that if we're thinking of a bus, we may help change the tires on the bus, or we may advise where the bus should, you know which direction—

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James McDevitt

if you want to go there, you may want to go there first. But the driver of the bus is the employee. The employee is responsible for their own personal development, their own career growth. As I said earlier, everybody's different. Everybody's unique. I wouldn't expect you would want me to tell you what you should do with your career. That's your choice.

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James McDevitt

That's your decision. And it's based on your interests and your experiences and what you want and what you want to get out of life. My role is to support you with that. Sometimes I can help you think of things you may not have thought of. Sometimes I can advise you that you may want to think about that instead of this in order to achieve your goal, like the zigzag approach you know. "I want to be CEO tomorrow."

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James McDevitt

Well, let's think about that for a second. And that's where HR can be, HR and managers; managers, supervisors play an essential role in this as well. And you should be having a conversation with you manager and your supervisor. Where do you want to go? How do you want to get there? What interests you? What skills do I want to learn? Because the relationship between manager and employee is the most important relationship of any relationship.

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James McDevitt

HR are there to coach, to mentor, to guide, to give additional information, to provide resources and help you think about things you may not have thought of before. Sometimes you may come and say, "I want to be, I want to do this. Any suggestions on how I can get there?" And that's where HR can help.

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Sophie Boler

I love the analogy of the bus. I think that's a really good way to put it. And you just mentioned resources. So do you have any tools out there that can really help an employee?

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James McDevitt

There's a lot of tools. Some are self-evident. This traditional SWOT analysis, for example, is a tool that can be used. You don't have to go online to do it. You can just do it yourself. You don't have to pay anybody to do it. What are your strengths, weaknesses, etc., etc. Think about what you like to do. That's a thought process, that's a tool.

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James McDevitt

Do a pros and cons list. What I mentioned before when I was younger and I thought, "I don't want to do this anymore, what do I want to do?" I didn't do a SWOT analysis, but I did a pros and cons list. "What do I like doing? What don't I like doing?" And I went through the process and it was very helpful to help formulate, well what do I really want to do?

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James McDevitt

And then the next step of the process was, well, what kind of jobs would help me do what I want to? And then the next step of the process was, well, what education, experience, qualifications do I need to have in order to do that? And as I said before, I went to night school for 2 years, got a qualification and I and I took my career in a different direction.

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James McDevitt

Having said that, there are tests available, quizzes available online. Your organization may have access to some of those personality tests. You may have done them already. They're helpful. They are useful. They can help identify personality traits that you're strong in, maybe a little something that you may need a bit of development in developing certain parts of your skill set.

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James McDevitt

So those are always helpful. And again, you can ask your HR department, is there any test that we have or quizzes or tools that we have within your organization that you can do to help formulate and really build, help with the conversation? "I think I'm good at this. I just did this test and it shows I actually I am."

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James McDevitt

Oh, yeah. So what does that mean and how can I move forward with that?

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Sophie Boler

Right. Well, you've given some great advice this episode as we wrap up here. Do you have like a top three list of tips that you would give someone just starting their career journey or creating their career path?

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James McDevitt

Sure. I'd start off by saying again what I said before. You can start or restart your career path at any time, and I'm an example of that. I was doing what I was doing. I didn't want to do it anymore, what do I want to do? And I went off and did something else. So I know someone who at the age of 11 wanted to be a lawyer and she is now, she made herself be a lawyer and she is a lawyer and she loves it and she wouldn't do anything else. Good for her.

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James McDevitt

Not everybody's like that. Not everybody knows what they want to do at the age of 11 or 12 or 14. And some people drift into jobs. Some people realize, actually, I drifted into this, but I quite like this. I enjoy this. And that's great. And some people, as I said before, might wake up one day and say,

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James McDevitt

"I don't want to do that anymore." That's all fine. As I said before, everybody's different. Everybody's unique. You can start or restart your career path at any time. So my advice would be, don't just think because you've invested 10, 15, 20 years in this career that you're kind of stuck. I don't believe that to be the case.

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James McDevitt

The second thing I would say, and again, repeating what I said before, figure out what you like doing. What you enjoy doing again is a bit of a cliché. If you enjoy what you do, is it really work? Well, it probably is work.. You still got to get up in the morning and you've got deadlines and all the rest of it.

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James McDevitt

But at the end of the day, if you enjoy what you're doing and you feel passionate and you like the outcome of what you're doing, that is so much better. It's so much better. And if you feel you're someone that wants to make a difference in the world and you can go home at night and say, "You know what, in my small way I did," that is a good thing.

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James McDevitt

And last and by no means least, enjoy yourself. You know, life is too short. If you can find something you like doing, enjoy yourself, learn new things as you go. Continue to be curious. Ask questions. No such thing as a dumb question. Ask lots of questions. Learn as you go. Progress your career and who knows where you'll end up.

00:21:07:09 - 00:21:09:01

Sophie Boler

And you're the driver of your own bus.

00:21:09:01 - 00:21:11:06

James McDevitt

And you're the driver of your own bus.

00:21:11:06 - 00:21:12:02

Sophie Boler

That's great advice.

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James McDevitt

And you know what? You get to put the destination on the front of the bus too.

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Sophie Boler

Change the map.

00:21:17:11 - 00:21:21:12

James McDevitt

Or you decide, I don't want to go there anymore, I want to go somewhere else. That's fine too.

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Sophie Boler

Absolutely. Well, that's a great wrap-up, James. So thank you so much again. That's all the time we have for today. But we have linked James' email as well as his LinkedIn profile in the show notes. So shoot him a message if you'd like to connect. If you like the episode or found it beneficial, we do encourage you to leave a review, leave a comment or subscribe on our website.

00:21:45:16 - 00:22:04:07

Sophie Boler

We would really appreciate that. Otherwise, we will see you next week when we're talking about organizational culture with Lisa Pook, so you don't want to miss that. But thank you again, James, and we will see you guys next week. 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.