Paul P: All right. Hi everybody. I'm Paul Parton. I'm pretty excited today because we've got the brilliant Ben Kalevitch here from United Minds to talk to us about a new study, their publishing on the employee experience. Hello Ben.

Ben K: You're too kind. Thank you.

Paul P: You're too kind for showing up. Thanks. Thanks so much for making the time to talk to us today. Before we start, Ben, I do need to know that this is actually a podcast between United minds and Collective Intelligence and I'm really enjoying the symmetry of that.

Ben K:I love it. Yeah, you can plan it. Yeah.

Paul P: Um Anyway, let's get on, why don't you just tell me or tell us a little bit about yourself and about United minds?

Ben K :Sure. So my background, most of my career has been spent in marketing and communications strategy. So a lot of that at Weber Shandwick, I spent a lot of time thinking about customers. So getting to know them, helping brands figure out how to engage with them. And a few years ago while I was at Weber Sound like I got to know a group of people who were doing some really interesting work um focused on employees. Um You know, they really focused on employee engagement and change management. Together we launched united minds, which is a consultancy that focuses on organizational transformation And if you think about the change that happens inside organizations, a lot of the same marketing principles that are used for most of my career still apply. So really understanding employees being purpose driven and how we engage them. Leading this authenticity all really important. So at this point I lead our employee experience work which really starts with deeply understanding what's most important to employees today and helping organizations take action to meet those needs, which is why I'm here. Right.

Paul P: Sure is. Yeah. I mean it's got to be the hot topic at the moment. It feels like every business conversation I'm involved in right now is about, you know the big quit or the great resignation or the talent war.It's very dramatic language what's going on?

Ben K: So we're in a situation where you know, 49% of employees are feeling burnt out right? And 49% of executives are considering hiring and retention really is the top threat to their business. So it's a Top and bottom line issue, especially when you consider that replacing these employees cost a very large amount of money. So for entry level people replacing a person costs about 30% of their salary for an executive. That's 400% of their salary. So these are big numbers.

And if you multiply that over thousands of employees that are in these companies and you look at how competitive the labor market is. You've got a tough situation for executives.

Paul P: That, I mean that math is pretty terrifying. I can't even imagine how people are feeling about that.

Ben K: We have gotten requests from basically all of the clients we currently work with for guidance on this, right? How do we think about issues related to returning to work, issues related to employee burnout retention. Lot of employers are looking at their employer brand once again and trying to figure out how can we make sure that people understand what's special about working here so that they can keep the people who are there, who may not always know all of the benefits and special aspects of the place, but also get new people to take a look and join.

Paul P: So you guys are at the top table right now, Is this like a temporary thing? Are we seeing a more kind of fundamental shift in the employer employee relationship?

Ben K: We think we're seeing a permanent shift? I think a lot of the discussion, if you look back years ago and over the last several years prior to covid was really about what does the employer give to the employee and what we've been learning is that the, what an employee actually gives back to the employer is just as important to their happiness, to their satisfaction, to deductive and our desire to stay. So we think that the relationship the contract if you will between employer and employee has fundamentally changed and organizations need to look at what is the future of work? How are things changing And we really see significant changes and surprises in what we're hearing from employees these days.

Paul P: I have to say. I'm slightly surprised by that response as well. I mean I guess there's been a lot of conversation that somewhat suggested that this was temporary, but you're, you're saying that this is something we've got to be, you've got to get used to.

Ben K: Yeah, I mean, I think what, what has maybe been more temporary or will be more temporary are things like addressing vaccination. Um, things like return to office protocol, like a lot of those things in 5, 10 years though, hopefully, hopefully then be behind us at how people think about balancing their lives, how they think about flexibility in the context of work, how they think about the contributions they're making. There have been some real changes and those we don't think will go away because they are more enduring in the sense that an employee now has a different headset about what's important to them. And so the vagaries of remote work may dissipate, but the contribution I make and my contract with my employer is likely to change radically Or change permanently, I should say.

Paul P: So I guess that takes us to the study that is obviously the impetus for it. Can you, can you tell us a little bit about the structure of the study and the size, scale markets etc?

Ben K: Absolutely. So we earlier this year ran a global survey of more than 2700 employees. We looked at seven markets around the world, us Canada, the UK Germany, Mexico china and Japan. And we looked at employees, a very diverse population of employees that included professional and office based for sure. But two thirds of our sample was actually service or front line folks and trade and manufacturing folks. We really wanted to make sure we understood the employee experience context of all of those groups because organizations have typically folks in at least two of those areas. So the study was asking a few things, how satisfied are you at your current job? Do you recommend this job or this company to a colleague or friend? And do you expect to stay? And we looked at those factors, kind of think of them as the employee experience factors. And we looked at what drove those factors and there were 79 factors that 79 possible drivers that we looked at. And we tried to figure out, let's rank them and cluster them to understand what's really what's really important to employees today.

Paul P: What surprised you the most?

Ben K: The thing that I think surprised us the most was the unimportance of remote work in the context of driving retention. So if you look at remote work, that was number 58 of 79 factors driving retention. So that's an awfully low number given how much focus there has been in the media on the ability to work remotely. Now you compare that to the number five driver of retention which is achieving work life balance and you start to think, well maybe there's really a strategic goal that companies and leaders need to focus on, which is around balance. Remote work is one lever for that. But there's certainly plenty of others in terms of both flex time. Um, you know, uh, different behaviors and mindsets that managers should be having and should be working. You should be using with their employees to sort of avoid overburdening them with too much work etcetera. So it's a really broad definition of flexibility. I think that we're seeing relative to what we're hearing in the media.

Paul P: It's pretty fascinating, isn't it? Because it's not just, I mean just anecdotally it feels like you here, you know, the demand for remote work constantly at the moment.

Ben K: Yeah. But you're also hearing employees talk about the fact that they come to work. They're excited to come back to work. So many people want to come back to the office even if it's not five days a week. They yearn for that, that social interaction, that sense of psychological safety as many put it. That comes from being part of a social experience that you can't really replicate on zoom.

Paul P: I think we've all experienced that psychological safety. That's an interesting phrase, Tell me what does that mean?

Ben K: So you know work is not a simple transaction, right? You don't get paid for a unit of work, you do get paid but you come and you work in an enterprise where there are teams of people trying to achieve objectives. And if you're separated from that team physically over the long period, long period of time, like we have you start to lose that group comfort, you start to lose the ability to laugh and have informal conversations, all of which make you feel more connected,

more comfortable and like you're having less of a transaction. I think these 30 minute 60 minute zoom meetings make for a and overly structured experience for people. And when they were in the office they can have one or two minute conversations with their boss or with a colleague. They can all gather around and watch a funny video for five minutes, right? These are things that make people feel more comfortable coming to work and feel more secure about their role.

Paul P: It's interesting, isn't it? That that that need for spontaneous interaction and the inability two schedule it.

Ben K: Oh yeah. Can you imagine trying to set up team meetings every five minutes. It's just too much. It's too hard logistically. The technology makes it, you know, we're not there yet. We're not, we're not in a place where hybrid working is so seamless that we can have those interactions. So there is going to be a drive back to work. Not everybody wants to go back. But if you look at the numbers, the vast majority do at least for some period of time.

Paul P: And I suppose there's a huge population that can't work remotely in the first place.

Ben K: Right. That's a good point. So folks who are on the front line, folks who are working on a factory floor, they have had no choice throughout the pandemic. And so certainly that's not going to be an issue for them. I think what is surprising though is that many folks in corporate environments, you know, they really want to come back. Um, our study didn't analyze the number of people that want to come back to full time or part time in office in office work. But there are plenty of studies out there that suggests there is a desire amongst a sizable portion of office based population that want to do that.

Paul P: What's the mentioned, the kind of contribution to the social organism and the, you know, the need for unstructured spontaneous connection. They're all quite emotionally driven aspects of work are emotionally driven benefits of work. Are they, are they becoming more important than the financially or transactional e driven benefits of work?

Ben K: So, you know, it's really interesting question. We, when you ask people what's most important to them, they will say job security number one, They will say competitive salary and benefits number four. But when you actually look look at what correlates to retention and satisfaction. you see that those are not things that are at the top and when you look closely, you see that things like motivation and You know, feeling like I'm making a contribution rise to the top five people, you know, are going to spend at least eight hours a day. So a third of their, you know, at least weekday life at work and they want to know that they're doing something that's achieving a goal that they're excited about. Right? So we're seeing before the pandemic, we saw a focus on purpose driven enterprises, on making sure that leaders are clear about what the purpose of the company is, making sure that the company is living its values. So those are all still important. But I think what was surprising to us is the weight of focus on, on appreciation, on my ability to contribute. So if you look at the top five factors, number two is I feel appreciated for my contributions and number three is I feel motivated or energized to do my best work. So, you know, if you look at it, 70% of employees who report feeling motivated are satisfied with their

jobs, But only 6% who don't feel that way are satisfied. So it's a dramatic increase when you get people to feel motivated about their work.

Paul P: Mm So it's a really interesting distinction between the things we say and the things that actually drive us the stated and unstated.

Ben K: It is. and I think that's that's always the case. Um typically when people talk about what they prefer, they talk about things that are going to be socially acceptable, they're going to be talking about things that are commonly talked about. Usually emotions are not things that were always tuned into, right. And so you have to look at correlations as opposed to what somebody says to know whether a particular emotional attribute is important or not. And we saw that it was clearly the case in our study.

Paul P: And what's creating that you say that 70% of employees who feel motivated or satisfied with their jobs, what's creating what leads to that feeling of motivation?

Ben K: Well, it's got a lot to do with managers. So managers need to importantly provide feedback. They need to be listening. They need to be empathizing, They need to be providing clarity and context on how the work fits into a bigger hole. A lot of companies over the last several years have been focusing on articulating their purpose and that's really critical and it's not just critical for leaders to understand their purpose. It's important that managers understand it and that managers are able to help their employees see how they're tasks ladder up to the bigger picture. So for example, we're working with one organization where folks who were working in the manufacturing plant, see their contribution by understanding that If they have zero defects of their product coming off the line, the consumer is going to have a better experience for salespeople who are thinking about how do I make sure that the product shows up well in store, they understand that if they don't have a beautiful display, the brand gets tarnished and the consumer may walk away. So making sure that these folks understand their connection even if the task is mundane, it's important to see the connection to the bigger picture.

Paul P: That's really interesting. So the that contribution to purpose sometimes we think of that as being quite a lofty thing. But you're saying that as long as they understand the goal and the bigger picture that's enough.

Ben K: It is I mean the other thing that managers really need to do and this is so simple. But you know, tell people that they have done well right celebrate the successes and I think the Atta boy, you know is certainly something that most managers do you. But formal celebrations, putting some structure around, making sure that people are honored for their contributions is something that not all organizations do very well. So really leaning into that and making those programs stronger more visible is something that's going to drive that sense of appreciation and the motivation to keep doing great.

Paul P: It makes a ton of sense when you are there any things that are kind of our more transactional or even just straight up table stakes for employees?

Ben K: Yeah, that's a important question. So one thing we learned very quickly. If you look at the data, people want a fair deal and that's more than just the money as we talked about earlier. That's about having a sense of security, a sense that I am being treated regard well regardless of my background. I'm being listened to. Those are all important things that if companies don't get right then nothing else matters that much. So for example, one in three employees face discrimination or harassment. That is an enormous number. And for those folks who do experience those issues, it comes as no surprise that they are less satisfied That they rate their company lower on all of the 79 factors that we talked about earlier example age is the number one driver of harassment and discrimination based on the survey.

Paul P: Wow that's surprising too, my goodness. Number one?

Ben K: Number one. And you know, looking at the data more carefully. It's not just folks at the upper end of the age spectrum, it's millennials as well. So folks feeling like they're getting discriminated or harassed based on their age is a major is a major issue. And it's not clear whether these folks feel like they have the opportunities that everybody else does on the labor market.

Paul P: But young people are facing age discrimination. That's something that's going to surprise a few people. I think.

Ben K: It was surprising to us as well. And the thing is young people are also very local about the issues that they face at work, right? So if people who are facing harassment discrimination are three times more likely to stay. And a large population of that is younger folks, then you've got a ticking time bomb in terms of both impact your culture but also impact your reputation because once these folks start talking about that externally, you know, that will create enormous costs and distraction for the organization, but on top of being a terrible situation for the employees and of course a possible negative impact on the culture because people will increasingly feel less safe, less happy there. It's just a vicious cycle. And if you don't correct that none of the other things that we're talking about matter.

Paul P: So you can do that sort of feels like job one really.

Ben K: Its job one. you gotta root it out. You've got to put the systems in place and most importantly, you've got to get leaders and managers to model the right behaviors because it starts at the top and leaders who model an inclusive approach to engaging with their employees, who listen, who seek out diverse perspectives who commit to their D and I commitments and walk the walk or walk the talk, I should say, and are going to have a huge impact on a positive culture, making a positive culture, making it more comfortable for these folks to contribute and

setting an example for managers and others in the organization to really embrace their contributions.

Paul P: That makes a lot of sense when you, when you started you, you described it as a need for fairness. And I think that focus on fairness is it keeps popping as a value. That's important for gen, z are you seeing this is generational or universal?

Ben K: We're seeing it is universal. So no matter what the demographic is, if they are treated unfairly, it has a dramatic impact on satisfaction, willingness to recommend and retention. So retention in a positive way.

Paul P: The more you speak, the less important things that we used to think of as the as is value that comes from work become, you know, salary benefits, bonuses.

Ben K: So those were all important. I should say that we have to be careful about throwing out some of the things that we know are going to make, you know, we're going to lead to decisions. So, you know, competitive salary for example, if you're not paid competitively, then you were going to feel like you're unfairly treated, which is going to lead to negative satisfaction of course and so on. So, you know, it's not that it doesn't matter. It's just that if you're, once you've met the bar of treating people fairly, but that compensation and all the rest of it, then you're able to look at the other factors that drive a superior experience.

Paul P: Well that's interesting in itself.It's not salary as a competitive benchmark. It's more just, just be fair.

Ben K: Just be fair. Yeah. And um, you know, one of the other things that we learned that really helps companies differentiate themselves is not just being fair, but giving people the autonomy and independence to make their own way through their work day. So really, you know, being able to direct their and work, being able to take risks and not get penalized, no, unfairly. These are things that really drive satisfaction as well and that independence may have something to do, It's not in the survey, but may have something to do with the last couple of years. People have been working more independently and have gotten used to developing routines that are individualist. So it doesn't surprise me to see that kind of trickling into perspectives on what matters to me at work.

Paul P: Is that another aspect of psychological safety, perhaps the safe space to navigate your own way through and not feel that you're gonna be judged for it?

Ben K: Yeah, maybe. I mean it's, you know, managers that are, you know, overly micromanaging their people. Um you know, that's a terrible behavior given what we've learned in the survey, it was never a great behavior, but I think the idea of giving people objectives and letting them sort their way through to meeting those objectives is really the name of the game right now and giving people the ability to figure it out, we'll go a long way.

Paul P: So I did notice something else in the study which is the slight and probably are possibly unsurprising clamoring for fun that people are having at the moment but that seemed to pop as well.

Ben K: It did. So of the 79 factors Fun place to work as number four.

Paul P: Four?

Ben K: Number four, So It's # four and a positive work environment is # one. So why is that the case? You know, we've had 18 months where we haven't had a lot of fun. We talked earlier about psychological safety, right? So it is not surprising actually that fun is so important these days. The funny thing about it is that it was one of the last questions we added to the survey and we didn't think it would go anywhere because of the environment, but people want to have fun and they want to have fun beyond going out for beers, right?
They happy hours great. But they want to enjoy their colleagues, they want to have people that they really like working with them and they, I want to make sure that the work that they're doing and the activities are engaged in are, you know, challenging that they're they're creative aspects, that they're creating solutions. You know, a lot of people talk about or write about deep fun, which is this notion of getting into solving novel problems and that we think is really important as an insight because I think if employers were to take away from the study that they need to increase the number of happy hours, like that would be a problem because we know that there's only a limited benefit of that kind of thing when you start to engage people in creative tasks, when you start it, give them time to do that again, this gets back to the self directed work that we talked about earlier too, so not overly prescribing or micromanaging people's activities that also leads to this notion of deep fun.

Paul P: Deep fun is a fascinating concept.

Ben K: It is, you know, and we didn't obviously come up with it, that wasn't something that came out of the survey, but when you look at what really gets people a lot of bed and it's coming to work making valuable contributions as we talked about earlier and being challenged. So when it comes to fun, you have to bring all that forward. It's not just about playing games and foosball tables and you know, the rest of it, it's about problem solving. So one thing that we've been doing with our team is giving them breaking them into teams to come up with solutions to potential business problems. And I'll tell you, you know, originally at the beginning of this project we had a lot of pushback because this is extra work suddenly and there are all kinds of questions about, well, how much do I have to devote to that? What is the output need to look like? The typical response you get from Taipei folks and by the end of the summer, when we had seen the results of what they had come up with, not only were they brilliant, but people really felt engaged in the process. They were excited to share what they found and they talked about it as being fun, right? So, you know, doing things like that, whether it's on a small scale or larger scale, some organizations might even devote persons a portion of a person's day to innovation work um like we know that that goes a long way and it needs to be built in and not something that, you know, you know, you fix through games.

Paul P: Yeah, I mean that sort of sounds like the theme that's running through this really. There just needs to be a sort of a deeper consideration given to all aspects of the employee experience that shallow and transactional, just aren't cutting it.

Ben K: Absolutely. You know, if we take a big step back, I think what we're learning is that what I give back what I contribute his just as important as what I get back and in fact it's more important than compensation, right? So, you know, that contribution needs to have a certain quality to it. It needs to be fun. It needs to feel purposeful; it needs to feel like it's connected to a broader set of activities or objectives that a company has.

Paul P: I mean it makes a ton of sense, doesn't it? I guess. I guess it also that also connects just to studies on what creates happiness for us as people.

Ben K: It does. I mean, I think one thing we know, if you look at happiness literature and look at the studies, you'll find that one of the things that really makes people happy is doing good, so volunteering, um, even giving money to charities, like even something as basic as that will make people feel happier. So if people feel happy about doing good in there personal life, you know, it's not surprising to me that that translates to the professional zone as well.

Paul P: Makes abundant sense to me. So there's a just a sense overall that, you know, you give back and contribute to a higher purpose. You engage more effectively with more effectively and more engagingly uh with the people you work with and get a fair deal there. Their fundamental, their fundamental concept certainly. But I think probably ones that are always employed in the workplace.

Ben K: Yeah, I mean, if you, you know, we have conversations with clients all the time about what they're focused on and you know, some are very focused on their compensation and benefits, trying to optimize that, trying to potentially get attention for some of the new benefits that they're offering and, you know, we counsel them to say that may get you some attention that may move the needle to some extent, but unless you're looking holistically at the employee experience the give and the gap, you're going to miss the opportunity to really differentiate yourself and keep and retain that top talent they need.

Paul P: So for those companies that would have to make quite a big shift to engage in this way. What's where do they start? What's the first step?

Ben K: Oh my goodness. So the first step is to really get to know what's happening in the company. So doing a diagnostic that you know, gets at all of these factors that we know are important Is the first step. So something we've developed as a short 10 minute survey that takes all the insights and looks at Of all the 79 factors, one of the ones that are most important. And we get people to get employees to feedback on how the organization is doing on those, that gives us a benchmark. And it gives clients a lens into where they're doing well and what they can

therefore amplify and where they're falling short and so where they need to invest. And all of that gives you a really rich action plan from which you can start to make positive change.

Paul P: Uh that makes total sense as well. And that's presumably something that we could, you know, that different agencies could take out to their own clients.

Ben K: Absolutely, Absolutely.

Paul P: And so beyond beyond that, I guess, you know, they're going to be a lot of people listening to this who are in who are managing our own agency brands, what what can our own IPG leaders do.

Ben K: Yeah, that's a good question. I think there's so many things that people can be doing. So. For example, if you're looking at, you know, helping people make a positive contribution. There are a couple of things for example, really recognizing peers, managers, leaders, getting all of those folks to be aware of the contributions that people are making and recognizing them not just with money because again, we know that that only goes so far, but with, you know, public recognition with other non monetary rewards, maybe even time to pursue your own pet project.That's a huge, huge thing that could be valuable. Also giving feedback. I think one of the things that I have seen in the agency world is perhaps a reluctance to give as much feedback as in other places I've worked, I shouldn't say that that's the case at all agencies, but I think making sure that people feel like they can get real time feedback and you know, rich feedback at the end of the year, he's going to make people feel like they're learning, you know, they've gotten this gift right of information that lets them know how to tweak their performance at change their focus and contribute more and you know, as painful as feedback and sometimes be to get and also to give, we know that it really drives that growth and that connection to the impact on making if we look at, you know, what do I get back from my employer encouragement, So, again, a very small thing to do, but providing people with the encouragement to take risks to solve your own problems, sort of solve the problems that you have in your own fashion.It's also about giving people the ability to focus. So I think one of the, you know, one of the contributors to burnout and a sense of there's not enough balance in my life is too many tasks, too many different directions, giving people that more focus allows them to take a breath and invest and make contributions in the areas that their strongest. One other thing that I think employers should really think about, our agency leaders should think about as well is creating a, you know, positive culture that has co creation at its heart.Right, so how are we getting people to help us solve business problems that's, you know, having these teams go off and coming up with new solutions or getting people involved in thinking through what the culture should be. So we've always believed that united minds in stakeholder engagement, people are only going to make changes if they're part of the solution they need to be brought along, and that couldn't be more important in the development of a positive culture too. I love that, and it feels like a pretty great place to end a positive culture with co creation at its heart.

Paul P: Um it's great work, Ben, thanks so much for taking the time to share it with us. It's given me, and probably, I'm sure all of us so much to reflect on his managers and his employees, and quite frankly as people too. So awesome work.

Ben K: My pleasure. Thanks for having me speak soon.

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