

## BACK TO BUSINESS IOWA PODCAST

A partnership of Iowa State University Extension and Outreach and America's SBDC Iowa

### SEASON 1 | EPISODE 21: Human Resource Strategies—COVID-19 (24:14; published May 29, 2020)

Description: *Steve Adams hosts Dr. Maartje Schouten, assistant professor in the Department of Management at Iowa State University's Ivy College of Business. Her research and teaching specifically focus on human resource areas of teams, social hierarchy, power, status and perspective taking. Dr. Schouten will discuss human resource strategies in the current COVID-19 environment, including retaining talent, best practices, and inclusive planning in reopening for business.*

#### Transcript:

[music]

#### Steve Adams, host 00:10

Hello, and welcome to the Back to Business Iowa podcast from Iowa State University Extension and Outreach. This podcast is a collaboration between Iowa State University Extension and Outreach and the programs including Community and Economic Development, Farm, Food and Enterprise Development and the Iowa Small Business Development Centers. These podcasts cover relevant topics for businesses and individuals related to education, research and technical assistance during and post COVID-19.

Hello, and welcome to the Back to Business Iowa podcast. I'm Steve Adams, field specialist at Iowa State University Extension and Outreach in the Community and Economic Development unit and your host for today's program, and this podcast will be discussing the human resource strategies for businesses to retain their workforce. Our guest today is Dr. Maartje Schouten. And Dr. Schouten teaches human resource management in the undergraduate business program at Iowa State University and is one of the 2019-2020 Miller Faculty Fellowship recipients for her innovations in teaching human resource management. Dr. Schouten, thank you for joining us today.

#### Maartje Schouten 01:37

Thank you for having me.

#### Steve Adams, host 01:39

Maartje, before we get into the heart of today's topic, would you provide us some detail on your background including what you research and teach at the Ivy College of Business?

#### Maartje Schouten 01:49

A large part of my job is indeed to do research, not just disseminate knowledge but also to create knowledge and I predominantly study leadership and team dynamics. So I am very interested in understanding what makes leaders more effective and what makes teams more effective. And how do diverse teams operate more effectively. And more recently, I've started to dabble a little bit in the area of COVID 19 research, focusing on how has this impacted employees. How is this impacting employees who are working from home and are still working on a team, for instance, like, how do you keep communicating? How do you keep the team spirit alive?



**Steve Adams, host 02:36**

So as Iowa begins to reopen businesses, and what we are all hoping I think is a post recovery COVID-19, what are some of the things you've been reviewing in regard to employers from a human resource management perspective?

**Maartje Schouten 02:51**

So I think there are a couple of things that you want to be really mindful about when you're thinking about reopening your business. Obviously, the first thing is that you need to know the rules, you need to understand what the state is mandating that you do. So if you are a restaurant, you should probably operate only at 50% capacity, and making sure that tables are spaced out six feet apart. But I also would recommend that you know the value of your employees. What is it that they bring to the table? That might be that some employees are more valuable to your company than others. And understanding how they're contributing will help you shape your plans, will shape who are the most important stakeholders on the employee side for you that you want to listen to most carefully when it comes to how they feel about reopening or not.

And then lastly, I would say it's really important that you understand what signals that you're sending both explicitly and but also maybe implicitly by social media outings, by the way that you communicate with your employees, or maybe that you don't communicate with employees that have been furloughed for you. It's really important that you are mindful and strategic about the fact that your employees probably are in a very uncertain situation much like you, but where you have a lot of power to control that situation, or at least to determine what is being done when the business opens, they are much more dependent on you and as a result might be much more attuned to the kind of the more interpersonal signals of subtle signals, subtle cues that you're sending to them with regard to how much you value them and how much you value reopening.

**Steve Adams, host 04:46**

Well, certainly, I think the federal CARES Act program and especially the Payment Protection Program were really set up there to try to help create some retention possibilities. But are there some specific strategies that you feel would assist an employer to retain that critical employee?

**Maartje Schouten 05:06**

When you can, when you're able to make use of those programs that are out there, especially if you are if you had to shut down because you were a non-essential business for weeks on end that, you know, I can imagine that you're in a very tight financial spot right now. But there are also a lot of things that you can do that aren't necessarily very costly. So, if you had to furlough employees, or if you had to make sure that these employees were no longer putting a financial burden on your company, you can still maintain a relationship with them if you want them back, if you want them engaged with your company, by saying things like sending a text message, checking in, "how are you doing?" If appropriate, maybe have a socially distanced happy hour or just even a call with them or with a bunch of your employees. That might make them feel that they are connected to you, that you care about them, and that you want them back even though you might not be able to employ them right away.

I think a lot of people are understanding about the situation and they all prefer to be cared for and heard from, more than, you know, this boss that maybe shows up in 12 weeks after not hearing from them for you know, for a long time, those employees might not be as keen to join you back if there are other options for them. Another thing that I would really stress that you do is make sure that you have a plan, a mindful plan, a plan that is concrete about how you're going to facilitate the reopening. It is fine if you are deciding not to reopen for a while. For instance, if it works fine for your company to have your employees work remotely, but communicate that to them. Communicate, we are not going to be on the forefront of reopening, we are going to stay, we are going to keep you working remotely for the foreseeable future.

If you are planning on bringing people back into the office, have a concrete plan that is actionable and that clearly spells out "this is what we are planning on doing." So here is how we are making sure that you are socially distancing between employees, that we have stepped up our cleaning game, we are putting up screens, so this is something that is definitely happening at the at the university where a lot of our employees that deal with our students on a regular basis might have some additional protective modifications to their workplace. Whereas where I'm in an office, these are maybe a little less relevant for me.

But making your reopening plans are very concrete and ideally involving your employees in that reopening plan, maybe bringing them back to the workplace before you formally reopen and do a trial run of how that plan is going to work, so that people give their input and maybe feel heard and valued in being made a partner in this reopening, so that they might be more compliant when it comes to actually implementing all these new rules and measures.

**Steve Adams, host 08:25**

Well, I can appreciate that. And I do like what you've been talking about in regards to workplace safety. And I know that that's critical, but communication again, is the key and having them invested in the process by giving you ideas and making suggestions to you as the boss kind of gives everybody a buy-in into this situation. So I know if somebody had a pre-existing condition or a condition that may not be conducive to returning to the workplace, and they will really concerned about their safety, what would you tell an employer, excuse me an employee that raised that kind of concern to you if you were a boss. And I know that's a completely hypothetical situation on my part,

**Maartje Schouten 09:08**

Well, I would say have a process in place, so that these employees who have concerns about returning to the workplace, for instance, because they have health issues, or they are living with people that might be in a higher risk category, make sure that there is an avenue to voice those concerns, that doesn't necessarily have to be to you as the most senior manager. But it might, you know, set up a channel where there's an HR person who they can voice those concerns to. And I would try to operate from the frame of how can we make this possible, rather than this is not possible, this is going to be a problem. So thinking opportunities rather than problems, I think is a critical part here.

And that is consistent with kind of, if you're looking at rules or regulations around Americans with Disabilities, we are also trying to provide reasonable accommodations to make things work. And I think you can, if you have any experience as an employer making those kinds of accommodations, I would maybe think about the same concerns that employees might have around COVID-19 in that context. So maybe adapt what you've been doing for ADA to what you're doing for corona.

**Steve Adams, host 10:29**

You see a lot of that even in some of the businesses that have reopened, you know, there are hand sanitizers on virtually every counter and Clorox wipes and, you know, of course, the splash shields that have gone up in front of cash registers. So, you know, a lot of people are doing those types of things already, so, I see that as being really important. But you talked about this plan and the strategies behind it. Are there specific elements that you think ought to be included in every single plan, no matter what kind of business you're in?

**Maartje Schouten 11:01**

I would say, first, how are you going to keep people safe? So that is partly the splash screen. It's partly the hand sanitizer, Clorox, the stepping up the cleaning routine and making it very clear what you're doing now extra, or in terms of keeping surfaces clean. So maybe you weren't cleaning the staircase railings every day. Now, maybe you want to do that more, make it very clear that you're doing that more, because that will again make people feel valued, clarifying what you're doing.

But also clarifying what the process is if things go wrong, if people do get sick. So I know that some businesses have expanded the number of sick days that you can take up on an annual basis, make that clear that that is what you're doing. Make it clear that there is a testing policy. So if someone were to be infected, how is that going to impact everyone that they've been in contact with? I think having a plan for not just prevention but also in the case that this does happen, making sure that people know that they're still being cared for, that there's that there's a sane strategy that will be put in place when people are infected.

**Steve Adams, host 12:23**

Well, and I think, you know, not only articulating that to the employees, but letting your customers know that as well would be critical, so that they know that you are taking those extra precautions not only for the protection of the employee, but for the protection of themselves as customers in your business.

**Maartje Schouten 12:41**

I have certainly adapted my shopping to stores where they do take more care both by providing or mandating employees wear face masks or having these splash shields, but also, both from a self interested perspective, in the sense that I don't necessarily am looking forward to getting COVID-19. But at the same time also because I as an HR professional, as someone who teaches that you need to care for your employees, I feel like I can't only talk the talk, I have to walk the walk, and I actually will go to stores where I perceive, I see that they're doing a better job of taking care of their employees. So it might even be a strategic advantage to you in how you treat your employees for how your customers see you.

**Steve Adams, host 13:30**

Well, excellent advice, I think for anybody there. So based on my personal experience, it seems that Iowa State University employees have received excellent communication from the administration during this whole COVID-19 crisis. I mean, it's almost weekly, if sometimes not daily in the early parts of this. But what are the best ways in your personal opinion to communicate and manage your online workforce that may be different from when those employees were working in the office?

**Maartje Schouten 14:01**

I think a critical difference between working online and working in the office is that I can now no longer knock on my colleague's door. I'm not going to run into him or her in the hallway, I can't. When I'm reading an email, I can't really sense your nonverbal communication. So like, are you smiling? Are you angry with me? Like all of that information is lost. I think it is incredibly important if you have this ability to set up maybe happy hours on Zoom, or on WebEx, or whatever medium that you want to use so that you can have that more informal communication, checking in, seeing—looking your employees in the eyes to see how are you actually doing as opposed to just asking via email.

And that also opens up a two-way street of communication, because email can be especially—even though I agree with you, the communication from Iowa State University has been really great—we have been kept in the loop very consistently, very clearly, with very clear and actionable plans. But I'm not feeling invited to then respond to these emails with my own concerns. So you have to probably make the extra effort to open up this two-way street of communication with your employees, where maybe that normally would be a little bit more assumed, you might have to take the extra step now of actually actively soliciting their input, having those happy hours, having other more informal touchpoints with them.

**Steve Adams, host 15:41**

Okay, Zoom happy hours. I don't suppose you have a favorite quarantini recipe, do you?

**Maartje Schouten 15:46**

Um, I drink straight up, I'll have to admit, so no recipe. [laughter]

**Steve Adams, host 15:53**

Well, from a distance and obviously I'm a field specialist, it was amazing for me, though, to see the transition for faculty and students at Iowa State University from you know, being in an in-person classroom to suddenly having to go all online to finish out the semester. And I know that that took some adaptation on the parts of both the faculty but also the student body as well. So can you kind of describe what that process was like for you and your students?

**Maartje Schouten 16:21**

We went from a highly interactive discussion-based class to one where it was more probably a traditional format of I provide lectures and you do assignments as a student. I ended up videotaping a lot of my material so that I would be able to, you know, the students would be able to listen to them, to my lectures on their at their own pace. Because I don't know what your home situation is like. I had one student reach out to me and you know, he works, or his parents have a farm, and he was, they were kind of thrilled that he was home because it was planting season so he could help plant. I had another student who lost her job and and lost a daycare of her child and as a result was very busy managing all these shocks to her life.

So from that perspective, having a slightly more self-paced, or I made the strategic decision to have a slightly more self-paced, self directed course for my students. Another thing that I normally would send them into the company to do some questioning of company HR policies. So figuring out how they are, how — I teach, obviously, the theory but how is this actually implemented in practice? And I switched that around to, How does the COVID 19 pandemic impact things like recruitment selection, like how do you envision this having an impact? My students seemed to enjoy that. Yeah, it was definitely a sudden transition. We were given five days notice that we were going to be online for the remainder of the semester. Yeah, I think we all manage as best as we could, we at least definitely did our best to make it as smooth of a transition as possible.

**Steve Adams, host 18:20**

Well, as we've discussed so many times that businesses have had to pivot to a new model, and I think we at the university level had to do the same thing. I too, had a homebound online student here for the second half of the semester, and it was definitely a challenge for him too, that's not his favorite learning environment. But again, I think the professors did the best they can could under the circumstances. Some of the more hands-on experiences you might get at a classroom level though of course are definitely out the window.

So I did see and did have a chance to get up on the website and saw that the Ivy College of Business is also offering four non-credit classes called "Ivy management faculty practice what they teach." So could you provide us a little—it looks really intriguing, but—a little additional detail on those classes and what's being offered and who's going to be eligible to take those classes? And if I wanted to sign up for one of them, how would I do that?

**Maartje Schouten 19:22**

Yeah, absolutely. So we're really excited. This is a new initiative that we are employing for the first time this semester or this summer, I should say. In our management department, we had four faculty members step up to the challenge of offering classes on talent management (so very much a how do you not just have employees but how do you make them a strategic asset to your company), nonprofit management (if we realize that at least 10% of company of organizations in the world are nonprofit, how do you effectively manage that when your goals might be a little bit more more diverse than simply making sure that you have a really good bottom line).

We have international management, which deals with how are companies making the decision to go into an international setting. Why do they do this? Why might it not be a good idea to internationalize to become a multinational company? And then the last course is entrepreneurship and innovation. So what are the basics of making sure that you are going to be successful as an entrepreneur? So each of these classes are going to be, or are offered online, they will start June 15 and run through August 7. They will be offered in an asynchronous manner, so it is going to be very easy to do this—if you are working, you can do it in the evening hours, it's for non-degree-seeking students. So basically, anyone who is interested can participate, you don't need to have a bachelor's degree to participate in these classes.

They are offered by top faculty in our department. So these are people that are passionate and make it, you know, teaching is their bread and butter. So they really, I think everyone who will be participating in these courses will have a fantastic experience with these specific professors. If you are interested in more information, take a look at our website: Ivy College of Business at Iowa State. We have a flyer there and if you are wanting to know more, I would reach out to our administrative specialist, Tara Cluff—her email is [tlcluff@iastate.edu](mailto:tlcluff@iastate.edu), and she is happy to provide all the ins and outs. So again, you don't need to have a undergraduate degree to participate, you just need to sign up as a non-degree-seeking student at Iowa State.

**Steve Adams, host 22:03**

That sounds extremely interesting on those classes, and I'm glad to hear that they're being offered. And like you said, the top end of the faculty is delivery it which makes it even more intriguing, I think. We need to find a way to cross market that for you Maartje, if we possibly could. So we'll get the word out one way or the other. So how are you marketing this program in particular?

**Maartje Schouten 22:25**

So we have been emailing our alumni base, and we have been trying to promote it as best as we can on our website.

**Steve Adams, host 22:36**

Terrific. So Dr. Schouten, thank you and how would somebody get ahold of you if they wanted to?

**Maartje Schouten 22:42**

Feel free to shoot me an email. I know my email is probably both complicated and easy because it is my first name, but it is [maartje@iastate.edu](mailto:maartje@iastate.edu).

**Steve Adams, host 22:57**

Perfect, thanks so much for that. Any final advice you'd like to throw out there to your listeners?

**Maartje Schouten 23:03**

Be wise about how you're going to be reopening. Make a plan, communicate the plan, and then stick to it.

**Steve Adams, host 23:11**

We really appreciate your time today. So, folks, if you have any questions about this Back to Business Iowa podcast, please feel free to contact me, Steve Adams at [stadams@iastate.edu](mailto:stadams@iastate.edu). And thank you, again for listening. This podcast is a collaboration between Iowa State Extension and Outreach and the Small Business Development Centers of Iowa. Always Serving Iowans, #StrongIowa. Our justice statement, this institution is an equal opportunity provider. For the full non-discrimination statement or accommodation inquiries, please go to [www.extension.state.edu/diversity/ext](http://www.extension.state.edu/diversity/ext). See you next time.

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