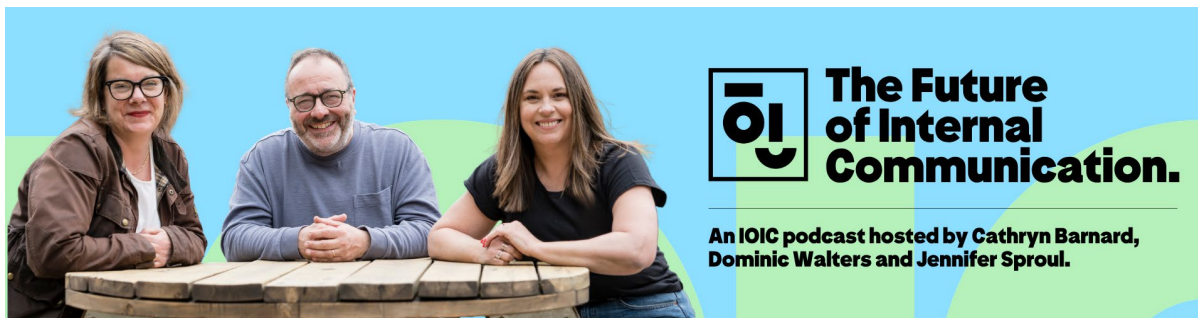




Transcript for S17, E2 – Expiry date never: age is the new superpower with Victoria Tomlinson

Intro: Welcome to the future of internal communication podcast. I'm Jen Sproul, CEO of the Institute of Internal Communication.

Since we launched this series in 2021, the world of work has been disrupted by event after event. A pandemic, geopolitics, AI, extreme weather events, remote and hybrid working, generational shifts, inclusion, diversity - the entire nature of how we work needs transformation.

This podcast explores opportunities for internal communication in the future of work. Internal comms is a critical function that helps organisations achieve lasting change, building trust and relationship between people, in pursuit of shared goals.

Please, join me, Dominic Walters and Cat Barnard as we dissect what this means for internal communication.

With relentless change the new norm, it's time to reimagine our profession.

Cat (00:59)

Hello and welcome to a fresh episode of the Future of Internal Communication podcast. I'm Cat Barnard, joined as ever by Jennifer Sproul and Dominic Walters. And today we are going to dive into a topic that actually has gained a lot of momentum, literally in the last couple of weeks because of a series of Instagram posts that have gone viral and then garnered a huge amount of media interest on the topic of age discrimination at work. The posts that I'm talking about, some of you may have familiarised yourself with the former editor of Elle Magazine. She took to Instagram and she was complaining about the fact that post Elle editorship, she had applied for a whole raft of jobs being completely, well, not unsuccessful. She simply hadn't heard anything back. And she was just venting her spleen on a reel on Instagram one day and was completely not expecting the massive influx of solidarity and support from other women over the age of 45 expressing a very similar opinion on the almost impossibility of getting access to work opportunities that are commensurate with years of experience and skill and craftsmanship and so on and so forth. It's kind of tragic that the only point at which that was picked up by the media was once this whole thing had exploded, but we're glad that it has exploded. And I'm really pleased to introduce our guest today because she has been fighting the long fights on this topic for several years now and has a book coming out this autumn on this very topic and so without further ado, I'm really pleased to welcome Victoria Tomlinson to the podcast today to talk about why age is the new superpower. So welcome Victoria.



Victoria Tomlinson (03:16)

Thank you very much Cat and I'm delighted to be here and as you say it's suddenly become topical but it has been an issue now for some time. I've been kind of working on this probably nearly a decade in kind of we'll talk about sort of how we got there but and I should say it's although the women's side has exploded it's men and women.

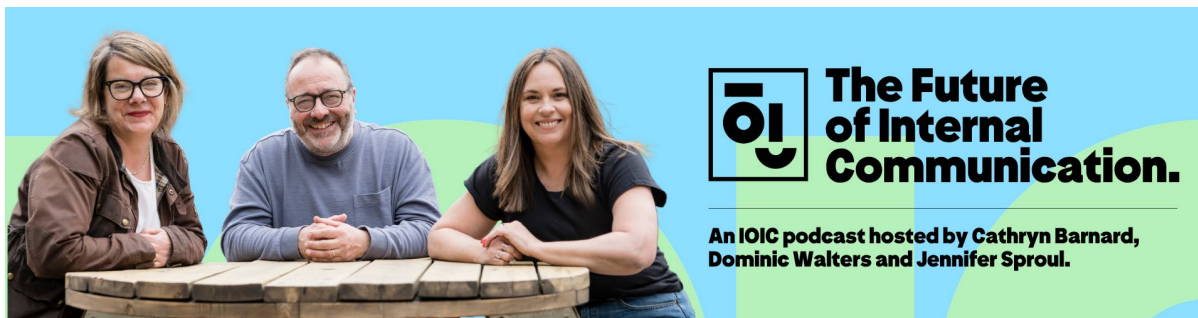
Cat (03:35)

Yes, and I totally get that and I realised as I was starting that I was possibly skewing towards gendered ageism. But let me just tell our listeners a tiny bit more about you and what you have been up to and where you've come from and then we'll get into the meat of what compelled you to write a book because I absolutely know that that is no small feat. So to those who aren't aware of Victoria and her work she spent her career challenging who gets to succeed at work and how, which is awesome. At EY, she led a culture change programme for the London office, taking responsibility for a team of over a hundred people who'd been overlooked in the firm's client service focus and making sure that they weren't. I'm just getting lovely activist vibes here. Victoria then went on to run a communications business for 30 years training organisations for the CIPR on making internal communications drive strategic goals. And she was named CIPR Communicator of the Year in Yorkshire. Since then, she's gone to set up an organisation called NextUp, and she now advises boards and senior leaders on skill shortages, workforce change, and how to unlock the value of experienced talent, including how AI can capture and scale critical expertise.

She's been a TEDx speaker, she's been a BBC commentator and the book, Expiry Date Never, comes out this month and makes the case that experience doesn't have an expiry date. Wow, neither does ambition double wow. So, what a career. I mean, where to start? I am so excited that you have written a book. I know you and I have been in contact now for several years talking about these range of labour market deficiencies, let's call it that. So tell us about Expiry Date Never, what led you to write it?

Victoria Tomlinson (05:41)

Okay, so you mentioned I'd had a commerce business and I was very early, particularly on the business to business side into social media. And I was seen as a bit odd. I sat on boards, I was on the board of Northern Ballet. I chaired a board for Leeds University. But I was in social media, as people put it. And people sort of, I did have one person say to me, what's a woman like you from Harrogate sitting on boards, what are you doing in social media? I mean, that is how awful things used to be. Do you remember how you were seen as being very odd? Anyway, so I was quite well known for being ahead of the curve on that and what I suddenly found, I was being sent people



who had left full-time work. You'll notice I'm being careful about language here. They had left full-time work and they had hated LinkedIn. They were very senior actually, most of them. And they had ignored LinkedIn. They hated it and suddenly realised when they're on their own, there weren't even any phone books left. So I was helping them to write LinkedIn profiles. Well, it's no good writing a profile about who you have been, even if you're the prime minister or the chief exec of something, nobody really cares. So I was trying to say, well, who are you now? What are you trying for? And in that process, I began to understand, my goodness.

These people were, I remember a banker who was clinically depressed. He said, I haven't been able to talk to even my wife about what I'm going through. And I began to realise the word that I've been avoiding, you might guess, is retirement. So people really, we are now living another 20 to 30 years more than previous generations. We haven't worked out what are we doing with that 20 to 30 years. So people are left lost. They're being retired ever earlier.

So you've got a widening gap here of age when people are left lost and lonely. Now, once upon a time, particularly the sorts of market that I started out with. When you retired, used to be because they were, let's face it, mostly men, mostly white men, if we're being really blunt about it, used to be non-exec or golf.

That was sort of how the world was divided. So then I used to say to people, so what are you trying to do? What do you want? And they struggled to articulate it. But eventually I realised they're trying to say I want a non-exec role. It wasn't that easily formed. It wasn't that articulated in their heads. They would say, I've had a blessed career. Things have come to me all my life. I just assumed it would happen at this next stage. And they were waiting for people. As I say, they were mostly men. They were they had had and they would recognise that privileged lives and they were expecting a tap on the shoulder, dear boy do come and join our board or come and help or advise us or consultant or something. They didn't know what they just thought they were extreme things. And then as I got more into this and the ridiculous thing was they were lost and lonely. They were, so many of them were in a bad health state and some of them really badly so. And I began to start researching what's going on here, realising that of course, boards are more diverse now. These people are intelligent. They may even have been recruiting more diverse people for their boards, but they haven't then applied. What does that mean for me? And the ridiculous thing was that on a Friday they were running the country, I like to say, and were gods. And then on Monday they were nobody. And yet they hadn't changed. So what are we doing with those skills and that talent? And as I got more involved, I realised you don't have to be running the country or whatever phrase we want to use and very senior. Actually this is an issue for everybody. We are wasting those skills and it doesn't matter whether you're senior, whether you're the editor of Elle or whoever you are.

People are not recruiting people over really what you said 45 is going down. IT people are saying it's 40 for IT people I mean I can't even begin as you say that you think am I living in some surreal world to be honest because it's completely ludicrous so we are wasting all this talent we haven't worked out what to do with this huge body of skills and talent that's looking for things to do and



that was where that book came from. Initially it started out it was going to be you know how you try out different things the ultimate handbook for senior executives or some rubbish like that and then as I got into it I thought no I want this to be for everybody and I want to influence government I want desperately to influence employers because they're wasting talent they're actually will come onto that I suspect in a bit but we have got an immersive skills crisis looming we've got 85 million that's Korn Ferry says there will be 85 million skills, shortage, vacancies, if you like by 2030. We are, as we speak in 2026, 85 million shortages. And then you have got thousands, millions of people looking to use their talent and they don't know how to do that. So we've got sort of huge crisis going on. And yet, out of all the problems that we're facing in the world at the moment, my goodness, there are a lot. This is one of the easiest things for us to it's within our grasp.

Cat (11:00)

I couldn't agree more. I couldn't agree more. There's a couple of things that I want to add into what you have just very succinctly outlined. One is, I think it is a disaster for society not to take on board the research that exists that shows there is a correlation between people retiring and early death.

And the hypothesis is that it is due to a sudden lack of purpose, a sudden lack of perceived usefulness, a lack of meaning in life. And I think we have to address that because exactly to your point, people are living longer and I've just been doing some work this morning on aging populations and the extent to which by 2050, the majority of populations in the global North will be majoritatively over the age of 60 and in parallel birth rates are absolutely dropping. So this whole piece around the restructuring of society is taking place in real time. What that then means for countries and their economies and how they derive and generate value has huge, huge implications that needs urgent, urgent attention. Bluntly, if you're listening to this and you are in government, I don't think we should be talking about disposable barbecues. I think we should be talking about these kinds of issues.

Victoria Tomlinson (12:27)

Yes, I agree.

Cat (12:28)

You know, and then the other thing is, you know, because of previous conversations that we've had, Victoria, I used to work in recruitment. I worked in recruitment and staffing for 20 odd years. I left because I was really disillusioned by the way in which in pursuit of cost and operational efficiency, organisations were prioritising recruitment algorithms.



And recruitment algorithms aren't working. They haven't worked for a long time. And in fact, I'd go further and say what they have done is bred out of those managing the process, the skills and expertise to pick up a telephone and dig deeper and ask questions about all the things that can't be contained in two sides of A4.

Victoria Tomlinson (13:21)

And Cat, can I add to what you said? In a way, I'm going to be really brutal. The lack of purpose doesn't just lead to early death. In many ways, you might say that would be better. Actually it leads to you're far more likely, you age 10 years more and you are far more likely to get Alzheimer's. So if we're worried about the social care problem in this country, this problem is going to exacerbate the number of people who cannot look after themselves and need care that we cannot afford at the moment, let alone the future. And yet keep people occupied, they could be independent. What I'm saying is at the moment we're heading for a massive drain on society with older people and no wonder everyone's worried about older people aging populations when actually if you keep people active they will be net contributors to society probably until 80s 90s and 100s. I want to change how we view age itself.

I'm very happy to declare that I'm 70 and I will out energise most people half my age and I've been, I don't have great health but actually having that massive sense of drive and purpose keeps you fit. I mean my doctor sort of can't quite believe what I'm doing with everything but that is for everybody that if you have that reason to get up in the morning, if you have something you've got to achieve and I know everyone says you're trying to get everyone to keep working until you're 80, 90. It's not exactly that, I think it's a good idea to be honest, but anyway. I think what we're trying to do is keep everybody mentally engaged and engaged with society rather than shutting down. And I mean, in the book, I've put in the research that says, and I've done a whole paragraph in very academic language explaining why you are more likely to get Alzheimer's because I thought I'm going to be challenged on this and I need the whole shebang.

Cat (15:11)

Yeah, yeah, I've read similar, I've read similar research. It's use it or lose it syndrome. If you are not continuously learning your brain atrophies and neurologically your synapses, the brain goes through a process which stands to reason of synaptic pruning. It just snips away all the pathways that may have been developed that are no longer in use because the brain is, as we know, it's a hugely efficient organ.

And the brain also is a high consumer of calories. Your brain demands a huge amount of energy every day. So it needs to be top of its game efficient. And if you're not using those neural



pathways, I'm looking at you, Dom. If you're not using your neural pathways, they get snipped, snippity snip over to...

Victoria Tomlinson (16:05)

I rather like the way you're saying that, Cat. I must remember this. I love it.

Dom (16:09)

Well, Cat, if you're talking about synoptic pruning, I think I'm suffering from synoptic deforestation on a large scale. So, you may have gathered from that previous interaction, I'm 59. Well, you wouldn't have gathered that, but I'm sort of very interested in.... That's where I am at the moment. I think I'm looking at a of this stuff from a personal point view, but also talking to lots of people who are similar age to me who are living exactly what you're talking about and so it just really happened very true and I was talking to a friend recently who was reminding me of the programme and again being of my age I remember this I'm sure many won't called Logan's Run which was American programme and just in case you missed it it was like in the 70s it was on the Sunday afternoon and the premise was that it was a future utopia where everyone had the most gilded and wonderful life, but everyone was culled at the age of 30. And Logan, the character Logan, refused to do this and went on the run as the name suggests. And the story was basically about the powers that be trying to capture him. But I think some people are saying about careers now. It's a bit like a career Logan run. We'll have a glorious time until we're 40, maybe, maybe not. Although we know that it's very difficult to start your career now as well for many people. And then it falls off a cliff. And then in the conversations I've had, interesting to get your take on this, but why it might be. I know some people say it's a mixture of number things. I'm sure it is. Firstly, the whole thing around algorithms. And again, I was really interested in reading, is it about botoxing your CV? I think people have talked about it.

Victoria Tomlinson (17:35)

Yes, horrible frame, yes.

Dom (17:38)

Which is a horrible phrase, but also most annoying because you seems to me by botoxing your CVs hacking out great chunks of experience. Surely you're devaluing this very stuff you're going to be offering so there's something about that. But then also about how much of it is our responsibility as people of a certain age because you mentioned those that you worked with that I



think my words were expecting great things to come to them and they didn't I think a generation like mine anyway probably did get tutored into that saying do the right things and a career will fall at your feet maybe nearly, not quite. So there's a bit about that. I think also about having valid expectations as to what sort of careers are available to you, what sort of occupations, sort of activities are available to you as well. So I think there's a chunk of stuff on the people who are going through this, I was going to say retirement, so I'm going to avoid saying that. And also I've heard as well, how, is it partly down to the fact that the sort of skills that people of a certain generation have used to forge successful careers and are just not needed in the same quantity anymore. And so we're going to market perhaps with stuff. I'll good to get your take on this, but go on, sorry.

Victoria Tomlinson (18:47.)

Start with that last one then. So when you see the skills that they've used to forge a craze aren't even what have you got in mind there?

Dom (18:52)

Well, I mean, some of may be very practical. So tech skills rapidly age, don't they? But that's a very practical one. But I think also, look at our own profession around communication. There are certain aspects around communication, certain skills within communication that people will have built very good careers around and which will be in less demand in the future. So for example, be able to draft, be able to craft stuff. I know some listeners are going to be spitting their tea out at this, but we have to be realistic that the demand for those sort of skills is going to be less and more focused.

Victoria Tomlinson (19:21)

OK, so let's take some of those. So first of all about pruning your CV. I think it's a shocker. It's the reality. It was Stacey Duguid. I don't quite know how you say her name. But she was told the botox your CV. She was told, I think, to take something like 10 years off her CV. And I've heard this plenty of times about people. And that's a shocker. Let's just park that for a moment here. The expectation I agree entirely with you, Dom. I think people have grown up with an expectation and sometimes it's become quite arrogant, actually, I think, and people haven't been very humble about what they're doing. And that is a problem. Let's sort of pick up owning your own career, which I love. And the book has got several chapters on this. We're talking about AI as well. And I'm saying in the book, make AI your best friend. Do not use AI. This comes on to what you're talking about in some ways. Do not use AI to craft, to draft to write whatever you want to say. Actually



that's where you need your experience. We have all seen, and what's the latest phrase, AI slop that you can report now.

So you can spot, I can spot, and I'm gathering the phrases that I'm going to do a blog on it to say, this is what gives away that you've had, apart from the long dashes, this is what gives away you've used AI. And what you want to do is keep using your skills, which is that judgment, it's understanding the market. I mean, how many times have we all put something through AI and absolute rubbish has come back. Apart from hallucinations, and I hope everybody listening would understand what hallucinations are.

AI want to please you. I know it's not a thing, but it kind of wants to please you. And therefore it makes up things. And literally when I was writing the book, I was trying to research case studies around the world. And I've got some gaps in South America, I think, and Africa. And I asked it to go and find me some. And then I'm double checking what these are. And I said, I can't find some of these. Oh no, I thought it would help you. I just thought I'd make them up. Literally, it comes back. So you need your head, your judgment head and your experience has never been and we argue this in the book, I have gone out with my co-author Louise Ballard. I went out to find her and I should say firmly here this is not about older rather than younger. This is about we need all generations together. We are more profitable, we're more successful, we need the enthusiasm, the blindness of youth and the whole kind of let's get on with it, along with the judgment that you get as you have been through the wars a bit. You know we need both of those together, all of them together.

So I am passionate again. I've got a whole chapter in the book around intergenerational. And I think people make it much more complicated than it needs to be. Keep people focused on work. They will find ways to work together. I almost worry that we're making it by saying we need to find all this inter-gen advice and things. No, you just need to run a good business and consult and listen to people and make help people work together. So that's sort of leaving all that aside. So coming back to owning that yourself. Yes.

And I think Cat you touched on this earlier, why have we got to the part where recruiters don't want to recruit older people? There are several reasons there because we have that, I think it's called lockstep, where you expect to get more pay the more you've been in a job for longer. And there's just an expectation that we will all get more pay as we get older. I think that has to go and that has caused a lot of problems. And the reality is give most 50 plus 60 plus an option, you can continue working for another 10 or 20 years at a lesser expense or finish all together. They will take that lesser expense. I'm not saying that's easy. I think for the individuals and for society, there's a massive rethink for your brains around the whole issue there. It's changing the way we have traditionally thought about pay and what we value. So that needs changing. There's this bit about tech, which actually is a myth.



I've said in the book something about I was of the generation that got excited about an IBM golf ball typewriter with self-correcting ribbon. You probably were much too young to remember that. Look at us now. Who use the typewriter last? All of us have adapted. We've all perfectly capable. What has happened is I mentioned about this generation of people and who didn't own LinkedIn and didn't use social media. So we had a generation, a few generations of time when senior people were not owning technology. They delegated it all. I sat on Boards and saw this. My fellow people, put out a feasibility study around new technology and things they didn't understand. They didn't get into it. They didn't own it. They weren't owning tech. And therefore they did not themselves own it. They didn't understand the need to be training their workforce. And the 50 plus generation has been hit by that, I believe, that they were the ones that should have been trained in the workforce and weren't. So what you then got were people recruiting, quote, digital natives.

le they came in already understanding and actually didn't really understand it any more than the older generations did. One of my business was doing social media campaigns and things. The youngsters I had an 18 year old who said to me, I never thought about using social media to engage with an audience. He just thought of it. He was 18 and he just sort of it like a phone. It was just a way of talking to people. So he didn't understand how to use it strategically. So what you had was a sort of weird thing going on where people thought that the youngsters were tech savvy. All it meant was they weren't frightened to go and press some buttons and things, and they quickly got how to create apps and all sorts of things that the older generation didn't. But if you go back to Covid, we saw in their thousands, if not millions of 80, 90, 100 year olds who were given a tablet of some kind, and they then set it up to communicate with their family.

And there was a need to do it, they were perfectly able to do it once it was set up and whatever. We just don't have an expectation or the training or the kind of processes to get people up. So there is now so much available free online. I would say to everybody. I say in the book, don't ever say I don't do tech because of course you do. And you own it yourself, get tech savvy. And that means so many different things. There is no such thing of anybody being tech everything. We all have our weaknesses and our strengths in tech. It doesn't really mean anything that does it? So we've got to do that and I would also say what you have to do is to start thinking about you, I have worked with some very large banks basically and there are a lot of people that are age 50 plus, somebody put it, they're hanging on by their fingernails waiting for the next redundancy package. They're not lively, they're not engaged, they're almost trying to keep a low profile, they don't want to leave too soon. So what they're not doing is getting involved in things that I'm saying in the book, get involved in initiatives.

Say every organisation has ESG initiatives, and environmental things like climate change, sustainability, more diversity, more whatever. Get involved in something that you care about. Use that then to become really well known. Go and interview people. You could go and interview your clients, colleagues. You could go out and interview people in the wider world, start blogging about it, be a thought leader on something or other so that you become a go-to person because those sorts of areas are where people are looking for expertise and keep aware of the market and what is



happening with it. So always be up to date with the market and go and position yourself in something that you care about. You can become a thought leader within months these days, you know, just voraciously read and share your thoughts, use LinkedIn or whatever to do that and engage and become an expert on something so that you're not seen as being flussy in the corner who's been there for 20 years and nobody quite knows what you do and if you left tomorrow nobody would miss you. You want to be that person who would be missed. I'm talking far too much here I'm passionate about all this.

Dom (27:41)

I'm going to pass over to Jen very soon, but there's one question I'd love to ask about this, I think you talk about age being a new superpower, which I think is a fantastic description of it. Just very briefly, that's a big subject, but when did people stop seeing it as a superpower? Because we have to reiterate that now. Historically we used to venerate, literally, older people. We used to look for their experience. So when did that stop and why do you think it stopped? Very big question, but it'd be good to get some two or three thoughts on that.

Victoria Tomlinson (28:12)

Yes, I haven't looked at it that way, so I'm going to give an off the top of the head response to that. I think that's been happening. We became, the 60s was all about youth culture, wasn't it? And I think that's sort of, but I think it started happening with technology really. And that's just me thinking off the top of my head. I suspect that's when people disengage, said they weren't into tech and people thought they were old and irrelevant. Cat, you mentioned earlier about the algorithms. I hadn't really picked up on that point. And Dom, you also mentioned about algorithms.

What's been happening also is that we are embedding if you like, discriminatory practices that have been there, whether they were intentional or not, that AI doesn't think for itself. It follows what's happening. I sat on, I gave a talk around the future of work probably four years ago, probably at an employment law firm's office, probably 30 of us around a big table. And there was a, I think it was head of HR, recruiter, whatever. And he, I was giving my talk around all this age and everything. And he just proudly said, dismissing everything I said, I guess. He said, I don't look at anybody's CV if they've worked for one organisation for 20 or more years. And I thought, wow. And it was later I got my head in gear. I was thrown by him being so open. I thought, my God, that is age discrimination. We're in an employment law firms offices. Nobody has challenged him. That is discriminatory. That is illegal, actually, to say that and do that. So we've kind of come to accept all of this and age discrimination is the last thing that we, it's ridiculous, we all hope to be that protected, if that's the right word, characteristic. We all hope to be able to grow older and yet that's the one thing that's not being challenged, age discrimination is not challenged.



Jen Sproul (30:07)

I've just been listening in and there's so many, I think we are all opening up about how our age is on this call. So I joined this call in the sense of openness as a 48 year old woman and there's many things. And so I guess I reflect that generation that is, I'm not thinking, I think my career has got donkey's years ahead of it. And it has.

Victoria Tomlinson (30:27)

Yeah, and it has, it has. Yes.

Jen Sproul (30:29)

But there is also this point when you get to, I started my career just before when internet was something you plugged in and I was the only one in the team that had the computer. And so I'd do everything for everybody and I was trying to create the first content management systems when editorial went from printed publications to daily news, which changed the whole model of commercial publishing in that way. And that was even before all that social media. And I sit here 25 odd years on and listening to you isn't it? I'm just having a personal reflection and I often say this to my team and perhaps I shouldn't say this or I say this to people I know and they go what do you do and I'm like well I'm a knower of a lot and a master of none.

Victoria Tomlinson (31:12)

No, no, no, don't say that. No, No, no, no.

Jen Sproul (31:13)

Exactly. And it makes me go, why do I say that? Because I do. There is so much wisdom collected in all of that knowing and all of those experiences and all those things. And listening to you as well, that's just my personal thing. I should I should stop doing that is what I've learned from this podcast today. Is that as listening to the narrative, you said, what Dom said, what Cat said as well, it feels like we've landed in one place that has been going on and been eroding for such a long time, whether it's, of course it's age, but it's also, I think we're seeing it on the younger end. I feel like we're building an entire workforce that's supposed to be this special place in the middle. There's nothing for young and nothing for here, which is absolutely poor for everything. But it feels like we've landed in one big long-term eroded space of one big misunderstanding, and which is



based on poor planning, poor planning for us. You say, what's our identity? What's our passion? Where do I skill? Like me going, I'm a master of many. Why haven't I been able to articulate that in a way that makes me go, therefore I'm skilled for this, or there's a role for that? Wrong assumptions that just because you're of this age, you're not a digital native. If you're young, you're probably lazy or all those kind of Gen Z awful things that go on as well. A fear of cost and expense. So for the older people, it's I move them up, they're more expensive and I can't afford them. And for the younger people, I've got to train to develop them and I don't want to put the L and D budget in. So you see you have this sort of bookended problem.

And we don't know, understand what expertise is and where it adds value in today's workforce and today's economic conditions, businesses, operations and skills. Because being an expert in technology is one skill of many. It is, and to make a successful business or one that competes, that has modernity, that actually has great collaboration, that enables innovation, that moves at pace, but also has great relationships. Because expertise as well, I would say, is wisdom as well, is that having experience of relationships and how to navigate relationships, whether they're with clients, people, customers, just general life is a wonderful thing to bring to the table. And we're continuing to perpetuate this with poor design, poor planning, poor judgment, and thinking we can leave it all up to an algorithm.

That's kind of a real, I guess, sad view of things, but I guess I want to kind of go to, I feel like we're going to just keep going down this path of misdesign. How do we course correct that misdesign, I guess, and how do we as work with employers to help them understand what they're missing out on, what they're overlooking in this depth of expertise that we have? Because if you're designing a workforce based on a limited understanding of the expertise that you need to make a well-functioning, market-responsive, competitive, market-driven, whatever that nature is.

How do we course correct actually what skill and expertise is needed to make a successful one? Because I would argue back to one of the things is judgment is the critical thing that I think will businesses will wake up in two or three years time with where they've made poor decisions, poor judgment or not interrogated or not thought the slop and they will lose things whether that's reputation, that's customers, whatever, because you've just thought not clearly enough about it. Anyway, how do we do that?

Cat (34:57)

Just to add into that, because just tying up two things that you've both said, Victoria's points about researching for the book and being fed a load of baloney by an algorithm that is some kind of computer code people pleaser thing. I mean, that is the essence of what we're talking about, right? You need that human oversight to be able to push back and challenge and not accept the first draft of, in that case, drivel that gets pushed at you.



Jen Sproul (35:36)

But yes, and I would add to my point, going back to but also human judgment on how you approach a situation, put tech and AI to a side. I mean, judgment in its entirety.

Victoria Tomlinson (35:47)

So I think what you're saying is what do boards need to do now in this?

Jen Sproul (35:52)

Yeah, how do they redesign to get that right pathway?

Victoria Tomlinson (35:52)

You've got to start with, and I would love to come and help boards do this. You've got to understand now and the next 10, 20 years with what's happening with skills and people and look at what you can push back on the assumptions that you're making that aren't true that will help you enormously. If we can get rid of those myths, it unlocks all sorts of talent for you.

So I think you first of need to understand you also need to start thinking about your markets. I've challenged in the book, people talk about a 50 plus generation. The oldest person alive at the moment is 116 years old. That is 66 years of living. You cannot put 66 years of people's lives into one category to understand how you market to them. And what's happening, I've got all sorts of facts and figures now where, for instance, the 60 plus generation are the most profitable for restaurants because they tend to book very large families, bookings, they tend to be very loyal, they go back regularly and they don't look to go to the next new thing etc. So have you thought about 60 plus? What are they looking for? Have you actually designed for that? Are you marketing to them? Peloton apparently, the largest growing market is the 50 plus. So yet everything is marketing is for young people in Peloton. And I just came across a whole bunch of facts and figures thinking I don't think anybody is thinking like this that your markets could be 50, 60, 70, 80.

I think everybody knows that the older generations have got most of the wealth in America. I think half the wealth of the country is in the 70 plus year olds. Now, you you need to be thinking about where are my markets, first of all, and to rethink what you have thought traditionally in terms of how you've marketed research segmented.

You need to do the same with your employees. I mean, there was a shocker that I came across a few years ago where people were asking somebody research asked people of different ages how how well are your skills being used? The 18 to 24 year olds might have been 16 to 24 years, I think.



So I think 68 % said yes, they're well used. 75 % of the 50 plus generation said no, they're not being used. 75 % of your older workforce are not using their skills. I mean, that is just downright stupid business, basically. I mean, what a waste of your people. Why are you employing them if they're not using their skills? And even if you take all sorts of things in that, that that was a not quite right figure or whatever you're saying, your older generation don't feel they're using, they've got a lot more to give you than they are using. So I think people need to go back to some data. I've been working with some very large organisations where one was great and they asked us what does a great workforce, what does a great workplace for the 50 plus generation look like and I love that we went and talked to all sorts of employers and came up with the best practice very far ahead even asking that question but when we asked to see their own employee engagement we never saw it and I have a feeling that if we had it would have said this bit that the older generations were not engaged and they were a good employer you know they didn't want to have and they would not have wanted to broadcast the fact that half their workforce was not very happy and not engaged. I mean, I think we all know that Gallup at the moment did a survey. Only 18 percent of the workforce is engaged at the moment. Eighteen percent. I mean, that should be a criminal outcry in the country. It's global, by the way. This is not just UK. What are we doing? I mean, how can we be running businesses that are so we all talk about internal commons, we want the best for employees and all the rest. We are making a really bad hash of it at the moment. And that's where I think you come back to. This isn't about AI, about tech, about anything here. It's about good old fashioned basics. I don't think managers are managing. I see too many examples now. I think management training has stopped. And I just think we need to go back to some basics here, really understand our markets and where they are and rethink how we measure some of this and start again with a lot of what we're doing. And I think actually it would open up so many opportunities. Whereas I think everybody's feeling a bit kind of stuck at the moment. I get the feeling. And I think if you went back to basics, you think, my God, there's so many opportunities here. What are we doing? I'm ever positive. I'm pretty sure that's what we'd all find.

Jen Sproul (40:23)

I think the back to basics thing is so key, because I think where I was going with it as well is that this sort of, we've made these weird boxes that everything fits into, which actually doesn't reflect reality. And it actually is not good design and it's not good practice and it's not good principle.

And I think there's also, I mean, I don't know. I lead a very small organisation, but I also think there's this constant fear of leaderships. If you don't do this and follow everybody else, then we'll be the ones that lose, rather than stop looking at everybody else and come back to fundamentally, what is your business? What is your market? What are you trying to get to? What do you need to achieve it? What does success hinge on for your business? And I think there's also, we talk a lot of this, but there's people who have knowledge and they can have skill and they can have behaviour. And what is all those things that we need to create in all those pockets that enable that success



to give? And I think that obviously we're talking a lot to internal communicators and picking up on your piece around Gallup as well is that with all of this going on and everyone could argue about, perhaps I'm sounding a bit grumpy now, but everyone can argue about tech and all these things and all these great things and we can all talk faster and we connect faster and we can learn faster and we can do faster and we can do all these things. But fundamentally, the stats have never been worse.

The economy is not planning for the future and not doing great. Businesses are on an efficiency game that I just think will cut cost and hopefully that will be okay, but not really strategically thinking through it as a consequence. Revenues are falling and customers are getting more disillusioned. And then from our point of view, we run the IC index, which looks at employee perspectives of internal communication. They don't understand why change. Trust is at the lowest point it's ever been. People are not backing the ideas. They're sitting there going, I am sitting here with a body of ideas. I want to be involved. I want to contribute. But there is no pathway or environment being created, which isn't that complicated, really, to enable that to live upwards.

Victoria Tomlinson (44:21)

Yes, I agree. We haven't talked about working from home, which I think has made a big difference. I do think that's created all sorts of other problems around this. I think it is probably as much as half the problem, to be honest. We know younger people from Covid, they don't feel so comfortable picking up the phone and building relationships and things. I think working from home has made that ever worse, to be honest. And I don't think therefore you've got collaboration and the communication going on that you should have. I mean, I've said to my team, we'll work endlessly flexibly to fit around everyone's lifestyles. But fundamentally, I want us all working together because that's where you get the energy and the ideas and things. You can do so much working from home, I don't think it's the answer, to be honest. Most people are moving back to being back in the office if they're going anywhere.

Jen Sproul (43:05)

I think I'm the same. I'm a very flexible work where you want is what we want to get from it. I think that's really important. But I'm going to pass to Dom now because I think we've touched on a topic that is one of Dom's area of greatest passions in the future of internal communication and our role to enable connection and conversation. That Dom is giving me my tenuous link to you as we kind of start to wrap up this podcast.



Dom (43:24)

Yes, thank you. And you're right of course, that is, I think, where the future of our profession has always been important, but does lie around building connections and helping to have conversations. So you've changed my perspective, Victoria, on this whole issue, so thank you very much for that.

Victoria Tomlinson (43:40)

Have I? In what way, Dom?

Dom (43:41)

Because I see it now as a, so the employment market is obviously a free market. Let's argue that. You could argue it's not in some ways, but let's say it's free market and a free market allocates resources where they're supposed to, where they have most value at its simplest. So it strikes me there's something not working within that lot of things not working. And from the conversation, I think on the supply side, so that's those of us of a certain age, let's put it that way. There are things we need to do differently, I think, from what we've said. We've got to change our expectations perhaps, realise things have changed, we can't expect things to come to us. I think we have to be prepared to do things differently and change our approach to learning new skills and seek out opportunities in different ways. So think there's a supply side thing there. There's a big shift encumbered by, I say us because I'm of that age.

On the demand side, I think you've said a lot of things about the people looking for these skills. First of all, don't rely upon algorithms. I think we've pretty much debunked the usefulness of the...

Victoria Tomlinson (44:41)

No, I don't think we do. It just needs a senior experienced judgmental, not judgmental, but you know, judgment head on it. I'm a great passionate for AI and huge efficiencies in things with the intelligence and some experience added into it.

Dom (44:57)

Yeah, that's a good correction. I think that's right. I think openness is something else. I just want to take a last bit of conversation. So as a potential employer, you've got to be open to the fact that skills present themselves in different ways and people present their own skills in different ways. I think we ought to pick up on that. And I think taking a good hard look at what we need. And again, it



strikes me that this is probably boiling it down to nothing, but organisations look at the sort of people they think they need, which is part of the story.

They don't always look at the skills that they need they may need and how to get them and as Jen was saying they may well think I'll train these in but then look actually I don't pay the expense of doing that but they wouldn't necessarily think well where can we go in the marketplace where these skills have already been developed. So I think that's a very crude analysis and I hope it doesn't boil down the complex conversation we've had into nothing. We are doing this podcast around the future of internal communication. Many of our listeners will be internal communicators.

I guess to bring us into land, would be great to get your take, Victoria, because you bring both these worlds. You've experienced some working communication and you've done extensive research into the whole topic. What do you think internal communicators can do to build that demand side, if you like, and establish a more, I guess, inclusive work culture that gives people the opportunity to demonstrate their skills and employ them? It's big question, I know.

Victoria Tomlinson (46:22)

No, it's okay. I think the thing I learned from doing all the training was too many people in internal communications see their roles as far too much about newsletters and I can't think what else, you know, the sort of a very mundane middle level. The thing that I always wanted to get them out of was to get them into the boardroom and understand what your organisation is trying to achieve and then work backwards from there. What communications do we need? And I think that's still, as I said earlier, get back to basics. That is still relevant. You need to make sure that, because I used to ask, I used to go around the room with the training that I did on internal comms and say, ask everybody to give me one key your organisation is facing this year that you're addressing. And honestly, it was only the private equity backed organisations who had a clear idea of what their measurable goal that they were trying to achieve was doing. So I think get back to be really clear. What are you about as an organisation? I say organisation because private, public, whatever, voluntary, it doesn't matter. What are you trying to do? And then how do we need to communicate internally? What is it needed? Start from there, not what do I put in a newsletter or whatever, which I think it so easily gets back to too quickly. So be strategic, get your head up and go and talk to the board and half the time it's that your board isn't very clear if I'm being honest and too often you haven't got a clear direction and the first thing have to do is go and challenge and that requires confidence. So you have to be confident yourself. That was how I got that job at EY. I went and challenged the board. It was seven o'clock at night. Knock knock, we have a problem Houston.

And then I was told we were trying to think what to do and your name was one of the ones we had. Do you want to take the job on? And I was 32. And so, actually opportunities come out of that. Go and be seen as business focused and be confident and go and be board level and make sure that you're addressing proper issues and you're taking that organisation forward.



Dom (48:28)

Victoria, I think you've also just summed up neatly what we're as an organisation, as a professional organisation, helping to support the profession to do. So thank you very much. Thank you for a great conversation. Thank you for joining us. I'm looking forward to your book. If nothing else, because it will help me build my synaptic exercise. My neural pathways. Thank you. So thank you very much for your time. Thank you, us.

Cat (48:42)

Your neural pathways, Dom.

Dom (48:43)

My neural pathways. Thank you. So thank you very much for your time. Thank you for joining us.

Victoria Tomlinson (48:47)

Thank you, I've loved it. Thank you so much and good luck.