

Maurice Fuller

Hi everyone. I'm Maurice Fuller and thanks for joining us. I'm with Anastasia Valentine, president of R1 Consulting based in Chicago. Today we're going to focus on the topics of automation, data management, and digital transformation leadership. Anastasia, thanks for joining us today.

Anastasia Valentine

Thanks for the invite, Maurice. I'm excited to be here.

MF

Absolutely. Well, Anastasia, you have a very interesting backstory. Tell us how you got started in the staffing industry.

AV

I got started in the staffing industry actually through a university job fair. I had decided to stay an extra semester at Northern Illinois to get a chemistry minor, what with applying to medical school the following fall. I was informed quickly by my parents that I wasn't going to be hanging around for nine months until we started school and that I should probably start looking for a job. So the night before a job fair at about midnight I wrote a resume, and the rest is history.

MF

So you started at a staffing firm and you never left.

AV

I never left. I ended up staying with staffing throughout my whole career and have never gone to medical school at this point.

MF

And now you're president of R1, so tell us a bit about your role in that position.

AV

So Resource 1 is a national consulting firm. We specialize primarily in technology. We service all 50 states, based out of Chicago, and have been actually for forty years this May. May will be our fortieth year anniversary.

MF

Congratulations!

AV

We're very excited. It'll be a year of a lot of fun celebratory events. With that said, we primarily function within the software development lifecycle: business integration, systems integration, database, everything from reporting to warehousing to migration. Everything that we do really is focused around building new product or supporting new

product or leveraging, modifying, or enhancing product. It's exciting to see a lot of the projects we've worked out actually out in our industry functioning today, from banking and food distribution to insurance. So that's what we do.

MF

Awesome. Well, one of the things I admire about you is that you've really been out front in adopting new technology for your staffing business. I wanted to ask you what's driven you to push the envelope on technology.

AV

So it's an interesting story of how we got to where we are today as an early adopter of technology. Staffing, in general, never really put much time or interest in building out complex systems within their organization's websites. In fact, three years ago 50 percent of our industry wasn't even mobile compatible. You couldn't even see their website on a mobile device.

We had started soliciting a new client, and we were trying to get involved with some major development that they had going on. We had gotten a phone call that they'd be willing to talk to us, and then we received an email like a day or two later. The head of this development group had gone out to our website and was appalled and said, it's very hard for me to bring out a business partner who hasn't committed to their own technology.

That was about nine years ago, and ever since then our board of directors and our c level suite said we need to commit to bring in technology, to adopt a new technical stack, and to build a better branding and marketing persona for the organization. That's why we started, because we lost a really good opportunity by not paying attention to how we looked outside of our organization.

MF

Now that is a fascinating story, and a painful lesson learned, but it has really paid off after you assimilated the lessons and doubled down on those investments. A lot of staffing firms could learn from that.

I wanted to talk to you a little bit about automation—one of the most important areas of innovation in staffing today—and get your thoughts on where we're heading in that area.

AV

Well, I think in our case the way we viewed automation was, how could we remove clicks within a work day? You can look at it as, does it take five clicks to make one thing happen. The way we would look at bringing in automation was seeing if we could get that down to two clicks, one click, or perhaps eliminate human interaction altogether. I think as we took that approach and went out to the marketplace and started reviewing technology, we realized that there was a fair amount of technology that we could adopt

that would reduce and or eliminate mundane tasks within our organization and keep our production team more focused on the business at hand. So I believe that's what really drives automation is the business function and the way that the team responds to the removal of these tasks.

MF

That reminds me of a conversation I had with a vendor that was focused on the onboarding space, and their product managers were looking at every instance where people were clicking and the amount of time that it took to onboard new employees. They were hyper focused on streamlining every facet of that onboarding process.

That leads me to the next topic I wanted to cover with you, which is AI and ML. It's a little bit early in the game within staffing, but everybody's talking about it, and I wanted to get your thoughts on where you feel that we're at right now.

AV

Well, we've partnered with one company for just about eight years who's done a really good job with ML and I believe with AI: continuous product development, to taking a simple query from a Boolean string, to dropping pages of documents into a search engine and having intelligence of connecting a job to people in your database and filtering it out. So I've personally been able to see how it's developed. Eight years ago, we were just writing and or statements, so we were native writing. Today, organizations can access that type of technology without that same level of training, which is very beneficial to a lot of organizations that are looking to expand faster and hire in new human capital that might not have that type of technology experience.

You know, we've talked about bots. We've talked about various pieces of technology that some may throw into AI and some don't throw into AI, but conversational bots are of interest to me. I always think about how I can tie that bot into AI that's been already developed and give it a little kickstart out of the gate. So we are working in conversation right now with a new vendor out in the marketplace to see if we can help them pilot and build integration into the ATS and CRM and maybe do kind of a UI handoff there for some AI.

MF

Yeah, and that brings up another point: one of the things that you've done a phenomenal job of is working with new vendors that are bringing technology to the staffing industry, and you've really helped multiple companies improve their offerings. You've been a catalyst for a lot of success within the staffing industry and the marketplace, and I very much admire you for that and what you've done there. I wanted to talk to you a little bit about third -party marketplace partners, where you've been very active. Where do you see gaps today in offerings?

AV

It's interesting when your product is Human Capital. We have not only the need of tracking the client side on a CRM or the ATS side to be able to find candidates, but you have a compliance aspect to it that really starts to get complicated. A lot of times, it's very rare that you see the controller or the CFO out at these conferences advocating for these gaps in systems and services to where we're finding a unified platform that can handle onboarding and time reporting, which generates into invoicing and can handle the compliances of just not I-9—but all these organizations have to comply with ACA now. So we have to offer insurance policies to people. If you have a 401 K, you have to open that up to everybody.

We've used technology to automate compliance. We've been very fortunate to do that, but it's not the solution. So we are anxiously waiting for someone to come out with more of an integrated unified backend to the stack to where we're not really just piecing it together through various partners.

MF

I agree. The systems that we have today are so complex and you know you mentioned compliance. With so many different pieces that we have to sort of stitch together, it adds a lot of complexity to our systems.

That takes me to the next topic I want to discuss with you which is data and data management. Data hygiene is such an important topic. I know you've worked really hard to make sure that you have clean data within your system. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

AV

Well, I would say that that has been a real big initiative. I wouldn't say that I gracefully respected it when I started building technology, but now I have a tremendous respect for it, and I'll give you an example. I don't think you really understand when you start piecing together technology and you have all these separate administration modules that you don't have data ever in one place. And then when you bring data into one place or try to bring data into one place, you have to make sure that every piece of technology that you're adding in is respecting that boundary or depositing or replicating information into that area to where the goal is—for us—to have one single source of truth but more so a completely transparent production environment. At any point in time we can go in and look at any person or any client, and you can see every piece of software that's interacting or has interacted completely outlined, so you're not walking in at all cold.

MF

That makes sense. You've built a fairly complex IT infrastructure with your ATS and a lot of different Marketplace partners, and so your staffing firm is becoming more and more technologically sophisticated. I want to ask you about your leadership style. How would you describe your leadership style?

AV

Well, I think my leadership style is very inclusive. I focus very much on empowerment and giving people responsibility. It even starts with just every time we implement a technology, anybody in our company, no matter what your position is, has the option to join in with that implementation from the start to finish. We pull in people to evaluate software. We have people get involved in sponsoring software. For example, as part of digital transformation, the only way you can really help people own software and to stay current with it is by having somebody with a similar skill set take some ownership and transfer that information.

My leadership style is very inclusive. I focus very much on empowerment and giving people responsibility. Digital transformation is about ownership and empowerment and giving your team the opportunity to educate each other.

It's not easy to have fifteen different functionalities in a tech stack and think that everybody's going to understand how to use it, how to use it in a business scenario, and it's going to stay current and updated with releases and new functionality. So digital transformation wasn't about just teaching adult learners. It was really about ownership. So yes, my management style goes into empowerment and giving our team the opportunity to educate each other.

MF

I want to talk a little bit about digital transformation. One of the things I'm very interested in is the balance between the strategic part of digital transformation and the tactical execution. We do need to have a vision of where we're moving and how we want to service our clients, how we want to service our employees and our candidates. But then we also need to tactically execute on these things. So how do you balance strategic vision versus tactical execution and incremental improvement?

AV

Yeah, that's interesting. Today we actually had a conversation about this. So in our organization, our technology group is its own vertical, and there's the big question of implementing technology and understanding the business logic of what you're trying to accomplish and somehow finding a mutual understanding between both parties, which isn't always easy. What's the tactical? What's the goal? What are we trying to achieve?

Just to give an example, we were thinking, okay, we've got extensions coming up in December. December in staffing, especially in IT, is a crazy month because people take their fiscal POs out to typically the end of the fiscal year and most people are on from January to December. So we thought, all right, how do we take technology and how do we be strategic? How do we notify all these people that we are on it and we know they're

up for extension so we don't have a mass exodus of people panicking and putting their resumes out into a very competitive Market.

So then you take business logic, you take a tech team, and you say all right, do we send out x amount of text messages? Who do they come from, and why? What's the next step; does everybody understand what we're doing, and then what are we calling, right? Like not automating it all, but automation mixed in with that human touch. That's where the strategy comes in, and then how do you implement it: a lot of working together. Our tech team got this mandate today that they really need to be able to bridge into every vertical of our company beyond just tech—but have an understanding of it.

MF

Interesting, that makes complete sense. I want to talk a little bit about the impact of the pandemic and how that's changed our Industry. We're starting to move into the post pandemic era very gradually and we're entering a new reality for how work is getting done, and it's very significant. More and more staffing firms are going hybrid, and I wanted to get your views on that. How do we build a successful hybrid staffing firm?

AV

This is interesting, and this is a hot topic for everybody. I won't pretend to know all the answers, but we have dedicated a fair amount of time educating ourselves and looking at some of the best practices that we know have been proven even prior to the pandemic. In our case, yes, hybrid is going to be the option for us. We looked at hybrid and said there has to be one person in each department present in our company. So however they manage that hybrid schedule, they can do, but we at least had to have one expert in each vertical on-prem.

The second part is that we looked at our culture, and I realized what made our culture so special is that we are together all the time. So then you have to look at your culture and say, well, how do we take this culture and this management style that's very much interacting face-to face and change this to support newer members in our organization that haven't even really experienced this culture. It's going to be a little bit different of an experience for them right out of the gate. So then we looked at it and said all right, we have to have a certain amount of set meetings every day—but they're quick. Fifteen minutes. The management team collaborates for fifteen minutes, maybe thirty. Right after that, each vertical team collaborates, and then that's it. So they're not meetings set through the day. We kick off the day. We know exactly what we're trying to accomplish, and then we meet the next day, we regroup, and do the same thing.

I think that everybody has loved it, and that was surprising to me. I guess I really thought that everybody liked this culture of a free kind of environment running back and forth. But I'll tell you, I think they like this a little bit more. It really really narrowed in on some good strategic work and some good ideas that might not have been expressed otherwise. I as a manager go across these verticals, so one day out of a week they get thirty minutes

with me, undivided attention, to provide strategic concepts in any areas where they need my help. What I found is most of the time my teams are using it for new ideas and strategic discussions. So that's great. Everybody from new employees to my most senior employees are all now getting engaged in a different way of thinking—and a lot more strategy.

MF

Awesome. It sounds like that's really been a step forward for your business and a step forward for your employees and your team, so that's super exciting. Well, I appreciate everything you've shared with us. Thank you very much. This has been an incredibly great discussion, and I want to thank everyone for joining us on the Staffing Technology Podcast. We'll see you next time.

AV

Thank you! Goodbye, everybody.