



Are Operations a Thing of the Past?

Season 2 – Episode 3: Don't Get Left Behind.

James: 0:03

Hello, I'm James.

Jimmy: 0:05

Hi, I'm Jimmy

James: 0:06

And welcome to A Job Done Well.

Jimmy: 0:08

the podcast that helps you improve your performance enjoyment at work

James: 0:12

Good morning. How are

Jimmy: 0:14

I'm well, how are you doing James?

James: 0:15

I'm doing very well. Thank you very much. Right. What are we going to talk about today?

Jimmy: 0:18

Well today we're doing a look forward to the future. is often

James: 0:23

Crystal ball gazing

Jimmy: 0:24

Crystal ball

James: 0:24

as opposed to navel gazing.

Jimmy: 0:26

Exactly. Well, we often spend a lot of time navel gazing and not enough time crystal ball gazing. So we are going to have a chat today about what do we think operations in organizations will look like over the next few years. And I guess the theory is if you want to be, 10 percent better at work. You do need to think more about the future and plan for the future. So today we are looking to provoke your thinking to work out how you might adapt or get ahead to the changes that are coming our way. Remember, life moves pretty fast.

James: 0:59

Yeah, you're Rishi's book there.

Jimmy: 1:04

Ferris Bueller, come on, I ain't quoting Rishi, Jesus.

James: 1:07

Right Then. So other than that, then what's going on?

Jimmy: 1:10

Not a lot here. I had the debacle last weekend where my youngest daughter on a night out lost her car keys.

James: 1:17

ah, Which,

Jimmy: 1:20

I don't know, apart from the Where

James: 1:21

did she lose them?

Jimmy: 1:22

in town somewhere, possibly in a number of nightclubs. But the thing is don't ever lose your car keys. And you think it's like, you know, go down to the locksmith and get a key. No, they're specially programmed and they cost hundreds of pounds. Well, avoid taking car keys on a night out when you're not taking your car. You don't need it at all.

James: 1:44

go. Very sensible. Well, I have been busy renovating lights. And the thing I've discovered is, if you're going to renovate lights, get an electrician. Because I damn near killed myself. I tell you, I have created the biggest spark you have ever seen in your life this week. Yeah, I still can feel it tingling at my arm.

Jimmy: 2:01

Well, at least it didn't kill ya.

James: 2:03

No, well at least. Yeah, there are a lot of people who are very happy about that. When I look at operations, I've seen people trying to mitigate it like crazy, right?

Jimmy: 2:12

Before you go there James, what do you mean by operations?

James: 2:15

What do I mean? I mean the act of getting stuff done for your customers.

Jimmy: 2:21

Right. So

James: 2:22

Although it could be. I mean, it's pretty broad.

Jimmy: 2:25

Well, it can And And it can be internal

James: 2:27

Yeah, absolutely

Jimmy: 2:28

So, if you work in finance or hr, they both run operations,

James: 2:34

I ran an operation for a while, which was the front end of a business. And I was loading materials into a business. And frankly, there were no external customer at all. I was just loading stuff for people within the business.

Jimmy: 2:45

So most organizations in the UK have some form of operation, don't they,

James: 2:50

they? Yeah.

Jimmy: 2:52

If you bear in mind

James: 2:52

think of one that

Jimmy: 2:53

doesn't. Yeah, we've mentioned in a previous episode, 80, plus percent of people in the U. K. work in service industries, that by its nature operations. Whether you call it operations or not, that's a different matter. But let's let's hold that one back for a second. So do you think it will even exist? Well, I think there's lots and lots of trends that will impact operations over the next few years. I mean, the big one at the moment, Is you, it's all about artificial intelligence. I bet if you went round all the big organizations in the uk, there's not, one of them won't be talking about ai.

James: 3:30

am sure every one of the big consulting houses is selling you an AI solution right now.

Jimmy: 3:34

Well, there's

James: 3:35

theirs will be better than everybody else's as

Jimmy: 3:37

Well, there's, there's some that that are advertising. They've got 1500 experts in, in ai. Which I'm guessing means they've got 1, 500 people that can spell artificial

James: 3:49

Well, it puts us ahead of the rest of

Jimmy: 3:51

I know I certainly can't, but there you go. But I guess the big question there is what will it do? Will it take our jobs? Yeah, Well I think if you go back and listen to the episode we did with Alex Alexander, who's absolute AI, his very strong view was around hybrid AI human. interactions rather than it's going to take our jobs. It

James: 4:14

won't take our jobs. It will make them different. But you've got to bear in mind we're recording this in Nottingham, right? So the home of the Luddites. You know about the Luddites, presumably?

Jimmy: 4:23

Before my time,

James: 4:24

Oh, so, the Luddites, for anybody who doesn't know, they were led by a guy called Ned Ludd. And in Nottingham you had lots and lots of lace mills. And when they

started to automate the lace mills, and they, built, put in the machines to do that. The Luddites said these machines are taking our jobs and they went round and smashed all the machinery.

Jimmy: 4:43

Right, there you

James: 4:44

Yeah, but a total waste of time because clearly all of those all of that melee equipment did not take everybody's jobs. It changed people's jobs but didn't take it. I think the same is true of artificial intelligence.

Jimmy: 4:55

Every day is a learning experience working with you, James. It's so I think that the few other things that will happen. I mean, customer behavior changes over time, doesn't it? And at the moment, the cost of living has been crippling for many people. And I think that that changes your views on, the value you get from organizations, what you're willing to pay and what you're not willing to pay for. How we communicate. I mean, my kids, I'm sure you're the same, they don't go near emails or anything like that. It's a thing of the past. I mean, text messages are a thing of the past for them.

James: 5:28

the past for them. Well,

Jimmy: 5:30

in the corporate world, using all sorts of new channels, but we're dipping our toes in some of the channels like TikTok and snap stuff like that. And where else are the new channels that they use? Well, that method of communication changes over time. I remember when to do business with your bank, you went into your bank and you, and then said, they said to you, go and use the phone. And it was like, Oh my God, I can't use the phone. Then you start using the phone. You're never going to go in your bank branch again, are you? And then you get onto online.

James: 5:58

was the hole in the wall. Yeah, Yeah, I vividly remember my dad having to get into the bank before it was about 1 o'clock on a Saturday, otherwise we didn't have any money for the weekend.

Jimmy: 6:07

Saturday and they weren't getting any money for the weekend. Alright, so you've got that, what else have you

James: 6:23

right. So you've got that. What else you've got going on that's changing

Jimmy: 6:26

that's changing? Generational changes. I mean, employee propositions and needs will change. And, over the next few years, we're going to continue to have an influx of Gen Z workers. I mean, both my kids are, now in full time work. And if I think about what they want from work and how they operate and they can't concentrate for more than 30 seconds on one thing.

James: 6:52

So I'm a bit unconvinced by Gen Z as an idea. I think it's a huge stereotype. However, you are right. When you look at well, post COVID, the world of work's changed dramatically. The whole thing about having to go into an office every day. Yeah. And what's really interesting, I mean, one of the big employers in Nottingham Boots, they have decided in their infinite wisdom that they expect everybody to go back into the office. And I imagine that will have a huge problem for them from an institution perspective.

Jimmy: 7:19

Yeah, so you've got changes to employee propositions, changes to workers behaviours, now there's a big push to get older workers back into the workplace after COVID. So all of a sudden you've got, the young people who want to work in a certain way and communicate in a certain way, older people who want to do it a different way. That adds to the complexity. And then I think there are a whole other host of things that have popped up in the last few years that are still only, in terms of their impact are only still maturing. So things like sustainability and what does

that mean for organizations and loads of people are scratching around and trying to tick boxes on making themselves more sustainable. The whole diversity and inclusion.

James: 8:02

I'm hoping the Americans are gonna have a DNI candidate in the White House very shortly.

Jimmy: 8:06

Fingers crossed. That will be very pleased with that.

James: 8:10

right, so we've got all of those different things. So the workplace is changing. But doesn't that mean then that operations is becoming a thing of the past? I mean, that's the key question here, isn't it?

Jimmy: 8:21

over the last few years, some of the things that supposedly would, mean that we don't need operations anymore. we've had voice response, robotics, digital, offshoring, branches have gone. All of these things have changed and a whole load of new things that happen.

James: 8:41

But, yeah, okay, but The thing there is, when you look at service organizations, they don't think of themselves as operational and they think they need to mitigate the operations. So for example, I have worked for a bank and I've worked for an insurance company and I've worked for a big data processor.

Jimmy: 8:59

and

James: 8:59

all of these organizations think that it's all about the technical skill. So for example, another class example would be the health service, right? It's all about being a good doctor or being a good nurse. But people don't value, I think, the whole

concept of operations. It's about being a technical specialist, not being able to run your organisation. And so, in some ways, I think it's become, yeah, a bit of a dirty word. It is.

Jimmy: 9:25

I think an interesting point is As a result of that, people don't invest in the skill. So it's not a skill set that a lot of organizations really excel at we worked in insurance for a long while and in insurance, everyone wants to improve their underwriting or maybe improve their claims. But then that's their technical claims, side of things. Very few actually see the value in driving operations actually to improve it. It's, it's, let's do all these things that are going to get rid of operations.

James: 10:02

And I think it depends where you come from.'cause oh, I mean, you've been doing operational jobs for years and years, but you don't actually call yourself an operations

Jimmy: 10:10

specialist. when I think of operations, because I've worked in service organisations, in particularly financial services, where the skill isn't really valued, you're not I won't call myself an operations person. I'd never have done. I'll try and avoid that in my job title, whereas you'll have a completely different

James: 10:28

yeah. But I started, I mean, I started my career in manufacturing. So I worked in very large food manufacturing plants and chemical plants and things like that. And there it was a definite skill, you know, because if people got it wrong,

Jimmy: 10:43

yeah

James: 10:44

somebody would die. Yeah. I worked for one organization. They had a, a An incident, let me say that, and I'm not going to say much more because I'll end up

in court. But the bloke who was responsible for the incident got the nickname Bhopal afterwards. Do you remember

Jimmy: 11:02

Oh, Yeah,

James: 11:02

that was the big incident in India where they, and this, he could have killed thousands and thousands of people. I mean, it's serious stuff. Whereas when you're in a I don't know, in a insurance or in a, presumably in a hospital, operations is the thing you give to Frank in the corner because he's quite organized, but it's not regarded as a, a serious

Jimmy: 11:22

it's, it's a back office thing. And, and I remember, when I worked for a certain insurer. I took over their commercial operation. which was all the thought of operations back office stuff, the supposed, the sexy part of it, the, the exciting part of it, that was the underwriting, the trading

James: 11:43

but you've got what, three or four things going on there then. So on the one hand, you've got organizations, particularly service organizations, where it's all about the technical specialism. It's all about, are you a good dentist? Are you a, whatever it might be. Yeah. You've got a gradual move to minimise operational stuff, you outsource it, you automate it, you shove it to wherever you can, just sweep it under the table. And then you've got this view that it's really not a useful skill. But then on the other hand, as we said earlier on, people are always going to need to get stuff done. So where does that leave us? We cover a whole host of topics on this

Jimmy: 12:26

Purpose to corporate jargon.

James: 12:27

but always focused on one thing, getting the job done well.

Jimmy: 12:31

Easier said than done. So, If you've got Unhappy customers or employees Bosses or regulators Breathing down your neck

James: 12:40

of control and your costs are spiraling and that big IT transformation project that you've been promised just keeps failing to deliver. So

Jimmy: 12:50

Can help if you need to improve your performance, your team's performance, or your organization's. Get in touch at jimmy at jobdonewell. com

James: 13:00

Or james at jobdonewell. com.

Jimmy: 13:03

All the trends that we've seen over the last 20 years have always promised to change everything dramatically. And to your point, they have changed the way the work's done, but they've never been the panacea for everything. And I think the trends that we talked about seeing now, whether that's, hybrid working to AI to changes in the workforce, I think they will change the work, as you said. But still need operations? I'm absolutely sure we will.

James: 13:32

will. Well, and I think, actually, it's about, it's a mindset, it's about how you look at problems and how you think about them. Because, frankly, the problems are the same. When I started my career in 1989, yeah, the place where I worked, things were too slow, they were too expensive, and the quality was a bit, yeah. Well, interestingly, we'd just done an engagement with a company, and their issues were, They were too slow, they were too expensive, and the quality wasn't great. So you have the same problems repeating, it's just within a different

Jimmy: 14:02

And you might be managing a different infrastructure. So I think, getting to grips with, the changes to the technology landscape, and understanding, what does it

mean for you and how you can leverage it, how you can use it. That's always useful. There are times, though, in customer interactions that people always want to speak to people. At the end of the day, I might be really happy only ever doing business online with my bank, but if I have a big problem, I may well want to talk to a person to get the reassurance that that problem's being so sorted out. you know what it's like when you're contacting an organization, you've got a problem, you need it sorted out, and you're just getting pushed into endless loops by chatbots. Really efficient, isn't it? But boy, does it piss you off?

James: 14:51

Well, it's efficient, it's not necessarily

Jimmy: 14:53

No. But I think that's because that when they, when organizations do things like chatbots, they haven't got. The basics all sorted out in their organization. So all they do is whether it's robotics, AI or IVRs or anything else outsourcing, it's just do it to something that fundamentally doesn't work effectively anyhow.

James: 15:16

Well, but that's driven by management thinking, isn't it? Right. We still got the same thinking, which is you must reduce your

Jimmy: 15:23

this year,

James: 15:23

this year in the short term. I am the boss. I know better. Here's your target. On you go.

Jimmy: 15:30

and that that attitudes, which I think we see now in organizations we saw five years, 10 years, 20 years ago, they limit success. So I think you're right. in the 2030s operations will look completely different. It will still be there. It will still have the same outcomes to sort out. Too expensive, too slow, quality not good enough.

James: 15:58

So even if we've got, even if you don't call them operations, you're still going to need operational thinking.

Jimmy: 16:02

You are. Right.

James: 16:04

Right, so we violently agree on that, but then we would, wouldn't we? Because even though you won't admit it, you are an ops guy. Right. Yeah. But what is operational thinking? How would you go about defining that then?

Jimmy: 16:15

now? So I think some of the things that people can develop that will really help set them up for success now and in the 2030s, establishing and really understanding your customer's needs. And I think that really links to something we talk about a lot, which is what's the overall purpose? Why, why are you even

James: 16:33

you want your operation to be successful, you need to know what it's supposed to be flipping doing. Yeah, and it's doing something for a customer. So if you don't understand what your customer wants, then you're kind of wasting your time.

Jimmy: 16:43

Yeah, and I think that that's where organizations often think about operations very one dimensionally. I think about it as a cost center. So

James: 16:53

No, I don't.

Jimmy: 16:54

just here to reduce cost.

James: 16:55

Yeah, well, that's my pet peeve, right? Because it's very easy to reduce costs, you know. Go and hide something, don't answer the phone, whatever it might be. But

well, we had a bloke in one organisation we worked for. It was an insurance company. He was very good at reducing costs. When he got insurance claims, he'd take one and pay it, and take another one and put it in a cabinet. It reduced the cost, but it wasn't really a long term play, was it?

Jimmy: 17:17

No, exactly. So, ensuring that all your activity is linked to that overall purpose. That's one key thing. Yeah. The second one, we touched on this in a previous episode when we were talking about thinking about operations more as a system, and I don't mean technology system. I mean the entire system. So, what do your people do within that

James: 17:39

your people doing, your processes, your Yeah. Your

Jimmy: 17:42

manage them, yeah, your leadership, your technology, the whole lot. And I'm really understanding it and figuring out how it performs as an entire

James: 17:53

Right, rather than being the world's best underwriter or being the

Jimmy: 17:57

the component. Yeah, the component parts of it. What about the whole lot?

James: 18:01

Yeah, so customer needs, think about it as a system. What else? I

Jimmy: 18:05

You've got to listen to and value your staff. The staff are the ones that are either serving your customers or enabling your customers or dealing with the technology, whatever it is. Make sure that you listen to them because they'll know what's really going on. Stay close to them. And, you know. Go and see their work.

James: 18:25

Oh, right, because you've got the ultimate feedback loop there. Yeah. Yeah, because how do you know if your organisation is working or not, if you don't talk to your staff and you don't go and see.

Jimmy: 18:35

Yeah, and I'll bet you, 9 out of 10 leaders who have big teams of people don't do either of those things. They tell their staff a lot, they'll communicate to their staff. Communication means me communicating to you.

James: 18:51

But, well, absolutely. The biggest breakthroughs I've ever had is always been when I've just taken the time to sit down, sit next to somebody and work out something's really

Jimmy: 19:01

really working. Yeah. and that's part of, you know, part of the culture and are you creating the right sort of culture that helps, ensure that you are successful and your organisation is successful. So are your people all aligned on delivering whatever that purpose and set up to do that?

James: 19:18

My pet peeve in this is this whole sort of blame culture thing. You know, if something goes wrong, trying to work out what went wrong, not who went wrong. Yeah. Yeah. Right. So then we've got culture. What else?

Jimmy: 19:29

Well, I think the other thing is, thinking a little bit more long term. We touched on one of the reasons some of the innovations in the past haven't really had the impact that we thought they would have is because of short term thinking. But that's really about looking over the horizon at what's coming at you.

James: 19:48

Yeah. Okay. But by that do you mean all the sort of shiny new toys or what do you

Jimmy: 19:52

No, that's, that's more, that's jumping on the bandwagon. So everyone is getting an AI, project running because that's what everyone else is doing. Not because they've been looking at the horizon and really understanding, you know, what's the technology innovation and what are competitors doing in the, you know, in the long term and really figuring out what that opportunity is for you. It's all just. You know, I want what you've got.

James: 20:16

Yeah, and I suppose I'm going to run the risk of making this inevitable. A never ending list, but that links to my whole thing about understand what the problem is, because AI might solve your problem or it might not, but there's no point throwing it in if you haven't got a problem which you want it to fix.

Jimmy: 20:31

And when we talk about competitors, try and look outside your industry because, we've worked in a number of industries where, the organization or people within the organization came to be the best, insurance company or the best credit card company or whatever. If the standard in your organization, in your industry, isn't that high, it's like living in a good house on a shit street. You know, it still doesn't mean that it's the best So

James: 20:56

Look at who's doing the best work outside

Jimmy: 21:00

at who's doing the best work outside of your industry.

James: 21:03

you

Jimmy: 21:03

And that's key fundamentally it's being open to learning. Don't think that you've got all the answers because that's one of the things that blinds us.

James: 21:13

Yeah, so let me summarize that then. Our view, what is operational thinking? Understand what your customer's needs. Think about your organization as a system. Listen to your staff and go and see what's going on. Worry about your culture. Is it delivering what you want? Think about the long term from a technology perspective. And then, as you rightly say, always be open to learning.

Jimmy: 21:33

it. Yeah. And ultimately, if you want to carry on learning, you can talk to us.

James: 21:38

Yeah, we'd love to talk to you.

Jimmy: 21:39

got lots of experience on how to help organizations improve their performance.

James: 21:44

So, in conclusion then, the reported demise of Ops is not happening as you put it. It is previous.

Jimmy: 21:50

Yes. And things will look different, but the problems may well be the same.

James: 21:56

Yeah. So yeah, really focus on operational thinking. How do you want this to work?

Jimmy: 22:01

Yeah. And if you do that now and into the future, Now you'll be successful and you'll improve your performance and so will you into the

James: 22:11

Lovely. Right. I'm glad I got that off my chest. I'll speak to you next week.

Jimmy: 22:15

Thanks everyone. Hopefully you've enjoyed today's episode and if you have any questions or comments for us, please get in touch. Thanks everyone.

James: 22:24

Cheers now.

Jimmy: 22:25

If you'd like to find out more about how James and I can help your business, then have a look at our website at ajobdonewell.com.