GW: Welcome to the "Global Opportunity Initiative" podcast series. I'm George Westerman, your host. Today, I'm delighted to be able to talk with Charlie Boyle, who is CEO of Customer Service Excellence Ireland, and with Oran Doherty, who is general manager for the Apprenticeship in Retail Supervision program there in Ireland also.
Gentlemen, welcome.

CB: Thank you. Thank you, George.

OD: Thanks very much. Delighted to join the podcast. Thank you.

GW: Can you each just introduce yourself so our listeners know what you're about?

CB: So Charlie Boyle is my name. I was born in New Jersey in the United States. You will not pick that up in the accent, I don't think.
And I moved move to Ireland with my parents when I was eight years of age. So as you say, George, I'm the CEO of Customer Service Excellence Ireland, which is a continuous improvement program in the area of customer experience. And we work with companies in probably about 12 sectors in Ireland and the UK.
We've kind of always looked outwards, I think, to the world. We've seen where our locals emigrate-- around the Boston area, New York, Philadelphia, and of course, across the water to the UK-- so, yeah, just really interested in the work you guys are doing at MIT and delighted to be involved in a couple of projects there as well.
I'm looking forward to the chat over the next half hour or so.

GW: Wonderful. Thank you. And Oran?

OD: Thanks, George. Yeah, my name is Oran Doherty. I'm currently the manager for the Retail Apprenticeship program in Ireland. It's an apprenticeship that targets existing and aspiring retail supervisors who are identified by their employer for future management positions. They continue to work full-time. And then, over 24 days a year, they attend college. And after the two years end, they graduate.
But I suppose my passion has always been industry education, engagements, and collaborations, and perhaps more specifically, workplace learning programs like our apprenticeship program. Before this job, I would have worked with the Department of Education and Skills in Ireland, identifying current and future skill needs of industry and then trying to find solutions for those skill needs.

GW: You know, I've been fascinated by what you've done there with the retail apprenticeship in Ireland. So can you tell us a little bit about that?

OD: I will indeed. Yeah, it's a fairly new program. It started delivering in 2019. So, again, it's fairly recent. It's been hugely successful.

Our numbers are very, very strong. We deliver it in three locations. We deliver it in the south of Ireland, the west of Ireland, and the very north of Ireland. So it doesn't matter where in Ireland you're employed. One of those three centers will be within three hours of the college location. But it's quite different from traditional apprenticeship programs in that all of our learners are existing full-time employees and in all different types of retail stores, from food, grocery, fashion, sports, DIY, pharmacy, you name it. And they all continue to work full-time as normal.
But then, about two to three days a month, they come to college. We do one module at a time. They go back into the workplace. They try to implement the learning they acquired in the classroom and the workplace to carry out tasks. And they work very closely with a trained workplace mentor.
So it's very much an alignment between the classroom, some online learning, workplace learning, which, in my view, is the most important location for learning, and then independent study. So it's bringing those four different modes of learning together and aligning them into a really good package.
And I think the reason it's so successful is because it really is genuinely industry-led. It was industry coming to us to find a solution to help them attract better staff and retain their existing staff. And they felt that education was perhaps the best vehicle to do that.
And we came up with a two-year course. But it's industry-led. And it's for industry by industry. And I think that's the key toward best learning is listening to industry because they know the sector better than we know the sector.
The employers are very engaged. They get involved in delivery. They get involved in the assessment. They come in and do guest picks. They review the syllabus very regularly. So it's very much their program, George.

GW: What is it about both sides of the equation here that you've been able to make it work? What does it take on both sides?

OD: From about 2015 to 2018, I spent a lot of time researching workplace learning partnerships and what were the biggest challenges and what were the biggest enablers.
And from talking to employers throughout Ireland and, indeed, Europe, and specialists in this field, we came to the conclusion that the biggest challenge and, I'd say, the biggest enabler to work-based learning partnerships like apprenticeships is organizational culture, overcoming organizational differences between industry and education, but even overcoming organizational culture issues within the employer organization and within the university.
I would say trust is very important as well. Universities have to trust the employers. And likewise, the employers have to trust the university in these work-based learning partnerships because I think they've got different agendas, different priorities.
Universities are set up to provide education, and learner welfare would be their big concern, whereas in most companies, it's about productivity, profitability. And so bringing it together and aligning these different cultures is probably key. But I do think the longer they spend with each other, if they've got people that are open to, I suppose, new approaches to educational learning, if you've got those kind of people involved, you definitely have a better chance of succeeding in work-based learning.

But I think there's drivers as well. If you talk to companies, the biggest challenge in industry throughout the world at the moment is talent-- talent attraction and talent retention. And one way to really address those talent problems is to develop work-based learning programs. And if it's done right, it's a win-win for both the education provider and for the employers that are participating on the program as well.
So I think the timing of it is quite good at the moment in the global economy as well in that the companies that are going to do best in the coming years are going to be the ones with the most knowledgeable workforce and are supposed to have the most knowledgeable workforce. You need to upskill them. You need to invest in training and education. So I really do feel that work-based learning initiatives are really going to increase in the coming years and going to take on much bigger numbers in the near future as well.

GW: Is there a reason you chose this supervision program as opposed to an entry kind of program?

OD: Yeah, that's a very good question, George. It's a question I'm asked quite a bit. My feeling was that employers are more likely to put on existing and invest in existing employees, employees who might have been in that company for two or three years, because when employers invest in apprenticeship programs like this, it is a big investment in time and money. But I think the onus in education in the future is going to be more for those already in employment as opposed to those seeking employment. The model in Ireland, and indeed, in many European countries up to that stage, was people would study from 18 to 22, get their degree, go into full-time employment, and have very little study after that. But the world of work is changing so fast now that that model is no longer going to work.
But it really does come down to having the most knowledgeable staff to be successful in the future. So universities and colleges who are interested in work-based learning programs, now is a really good time to be in it.

GW: So this sounds really fascinating, but I'm sure there are costs. And those costs, of course, have benefits. How do you think about the costs and benefits in this program?

OD: Well, in Ireland at the moment, there's a big drive to encourage people in employment to study, to upskill. I suppose, as a country, we want to compete with other countries. We want to have a knowledge economy. And with that comes advancement and training and education.
So we're very, very lucky, I suppose, in Ireland, in that recently, the Irish government has decided to really heavily fund apprenticeship programs for those that are already in employment. So, for example, in the retail apprenticeship program, there is actually no financial registration fee for the employer or for the employee. And in actual fact, you'll probably find this hard to believe, but employers that take on apprentices or put on some of their existing employees in the program, they actually get a 4,000-euro grant to cover travel and accommodation costs over the two years of the program.
And I suppose the indirect cost to employers is that the 24 days that they attend college each year, the two years, they count as work days.

But all the employers would say they get a really, really positive experience because they're getting people that are coming back with really good ideas, implementing these ideas in the workplace. They're saving costs. They're getting new revenues. They're coming up with new ways of doing things, faster ways of doing things.

GW: And how about for the student? What does this do for their wages, their salaries, before and after?

OD: I think it was somewhere between 60% and 70% of the people who would have commenced the program would have got a promotion either during the program or within six months of the program.
And on average, I suppose their salaries would have increased between 20% and 30%.

GW: We've talked a lot about culture over the years. And, Charlie, I know you think about culture a lot in this whole idea of customer service. Can you say a little bit about, what do we need in the culture to get great customer service when you're talking to employers out there?

CB: You know, I believe that culture is the most important factor in any company, any organization, that it works from there outwards. And I know we go back to the famous Drucker statement of "Culture eats strategy for breakfast." And I believe that.
And my own story of that, I knew I would have told you about it before. I was based in the UK. I was managing pubs. You know, I was really enjoying it.
And I found myself winning a couple of sales awards, national sales awards. And I couldn't figure it out, because I did not leave secondary school, second level, went to third level. I didn't step onto the third-level phase of education till I was 55.
I always sort of focused, for whatever reason, on the people that were working for me. It wasn't so much about the customers. And it wasn't that I didn't have a connection with the customers. But I would, just like Oran was saying there, I had supervisors, maybe try and develop them, send them to local college, maybe, to do a course to improve, maybe, their cooking skills or maybe their supervisory skills, making sure that the girls that were working part-time from the local Greenwich University were getting something to eat before they would start their shift, that they were getting a taxi home after work, paid for by the company.
Sales is an inevitable outcome of what you're doing internally. And I started getting really, really curious about, what's culture? What does culture have to do with running pubs in London?
And then I find it has everything to do with it. If I create this sort of healthy culture, do things that we in Donegal or we in Ireland sort of done naturally, just look after people, be decent, both to the team, to the staff, and then it worked from there to the outside.
So we got good at service. We got good at customer service. We got good at giving the customer a good experience. And the result worked outwards from there.
So eventually, I studied. I done a master's.
And the master's, you know, I just wanted to research this thing of the connection between internal customer service or the company culture and the outcomes. What impact did that have?
And I moved away from, obviously, at that stage, the pub industry.

I had set up Customer Service Excellence Ireland. But I wanted it to be something more than just training frontline staff. I wanted it to be something that looked internally.
So I done that master's. And doing the master's opened a whole new world in many ways. It made me believe in the power of education.
And that's where a lot of the work came from. So I wasn't-- it was niche. It wasn't out there chasing trading programs just in customer service, although we do offer them. And I teach in Oran's apprenticeship there, the retail apprenticeship. I teach the customer experience module there.
And everything that he says about it is absolutely true. It's fascinating working with these young people, it really is, and seeing their confidence grow. But I suppose one of the things they throw on to that is I throw on the whole thing about culture.
You don't get away with poor customer service internally with your team. Poor culture can't create a good outcome, unless you're an outlier. There are outliers. There's exceptions to that, as there always will be.
But I realized that when you have a healthy, safe, psychologically safe place for people to work and to make mistakes, but also structured, and also disciplined, and also asking the best of the employee, that helps. And that became the area of fascination. Having done the master's and opening up that-- and the master's was in leadership and innovation, but it was about much more than that.
I done the master's when I was 55 years of age. And I would consider going back and doing another one or doing another few because I think it's so useful.

GW: So, Charlie, you're giving me a pretty simple story. And I just want to say it can't be that simple. You're saying happy employees make happy customers, and that's kind of a truism. But there has to be more to it. When you're changing the culture of customer service in a company, what else is there?

CB: I suppose there's change management at play there. And there's the resistance. You know, I believe that when you go into an organization, and you're looking at the internal customer service, and you're looking at the culture, that I think the percentage-- I would love to do research in this, but my guess is that there's a 10-80-10 rule at play here.
10% of the people will roll with you. They will be as birds or animals. They'll be canaries. They will cheerlead the process on. They want to see change.
80% will be passive. They're hugely important later on in the process. And possibly 10% will go against it. They don't want to move. They don't want to change.
And if that percentage stays like that, it can be workable. You can still live with the 10% that resist it. And sometimes you need them. You need the minority voice.
But if those numbers are skewed-- if it's, for example, maybe 5% of cheerleaders and 15% rowing against it, and the passives aren't coming with you, it can be very, very tough.
Is there a learning culture in place? Are they open to having that learning culture for a program like Oran's to come on, or any work-based program? Lifelong learning is going to be so, so vital, so important, but just really measuring, how is the internal customer service here?

The measurement is key-- measurement at the beginning-- because they're putting their hands up. There's two things. They're giving you a score of where they're at. But they're also putting their hands up and saying, yeah, we need to move on this.
So you're not telling them. They're telling you. And then the change process starts.

And it's that thing of change, change from within, change the culture. And where it's wrong, fix it, or trying to fix it. And there are-- you're right. It's simple, but it's not easy. And there's a big difference.

So if I were to put this into three elements to your model, number one is treat your people really well. Number two is to be really clear about what's expected with the targets and everything so everybody knows. And number three is to manage the change process really well, including lots of measurements so you can see the progress.

GW: Let's talk about the human skills for a little bit. We certainly have developed this human skills matrix at MIT. Because there were so many different versions of this idea of soft skills or human skills or whatever else you-- power skills, whatever else you want to call them, we figured we should add one more version.
But our version, we feel good about it. And it seems to work. And, Charlie, I know you've talked to that. And, Oran, you've talked about that. But can you say a little bit more about the value of these human skills and how you develop them in people?

OD: Thanks, George. I suppose we done a few skills surveys for different sectors recently. We done want for the ICT, one for fintech, one for manufacturing, one for engineering, and then a more recent one for the retail sector-- so completely five different sectors altogether.
And without doubt, human skills came out on top. And we've done a lot of investigations. And I suppose the reason human skills were coming out on top was because you've got automation. You've got AI. You've got robotics all coming in that are doing the more repetitive, mundane tasks really well, better than humans can probably do them.
The people that can best develop their human skills are going to be the ones that are probably going to do best in the future. And we would always say to students in particular you're going to have to be more human. You're going to have to really enhance those human skills that you are naturally, I suppose, born with at the start.
I suppose when we really looked at the research from all the different sectors that we researched, we found that there was probably four sets of skills needed for every job-- human skills, which is the most important one, digital skills, probably the second one, business acumen skills, number three, and then the fourth set of skill will be dependent on the actual discipline you're trying to address.
And then that fourth component will be dependent on the actual discipline itself. So that was something new that came out. And we looked at different courses throughout numerous universities across Europe. And we found that human skills and business acumen skills in particular were being neglected.

And without doubt, human skills are difficult to address. And they're particularly difficult to address if you're going to rely on the educational system to address it. Most human skills are probably best acquired outside of classroom.
I would say the sports environment is going to become increasingly important in developing human skills going forward. And not everybody's interested in sports. So they don't have to be participating on the sports field. It could be the treasurer that could be organizing the games. It could be coaching. It's not just actual physically playing of the coaches — getting people at school, people at college, people at university, more involved in their local environment. And rather than doing fictitious case studies or doing crazy exams, get them helping a local charity, a local community group. Get them more engaged in that.

GW: I think I would argue with you a little bit on that, though, because one of the things that we've tried to do at MIT is to really figure out how can we put those-- at least some of the human skills into the classroom. So, for example, now, we will have students cosolve a calculus problem at the whiteboard together because then solving it together is a different process than just solving it at your desk.

So I think there are ways to do it in the classroom, at least what we've seen. But I do agree with you that a lot of this is going to happen in practice. And actually, when you're out there in the field doing something, that's when you realize how important it is and whether you've got the skills or not.

OD: Definitely. I think those initiatives you just spoke about are really good and really innovative. And they definitely will develop human skills. But I think you have to capitalize on the different learning locations-- the classroom, the sports field, the social environment, the community, and so on.
I think where we go wrong sometimes is where we rely too much an actual educational classroom. And it worked quite well up to the stage. But I think, with changes in the workplace, when you look at the future trends of work, I don't think the traditional model of education will work as well as maybe a more innovative, collaborative approach to education in the coming years.

GW: So I think you're right. These different situations can be wonderful training opportunities. And to think about the whole spectrum of opportunities, not just the classroom, sounds like a smart way to go.

OD: I think education really did rely quite a bit on you learn something, you regurgitate it, you give it back to me in an exam or an assignment. But the future work is really on knowing. So it's really learning people how to learn. And Charlie mentioned that earlier on.
So I would put less emphasis on teaching knowledge but put much, much more emphasis on showing people how to go and get knowledge. So I suppose don't be seeing knowledge as stacks or crates or boxes of information. It almost needs to be like a shower or something that's always on that you need to be able to go in and out of and know what knowledge should take and what knowledge not to take and how to separate the good knowledge from the bad

knowledge. I think that's the skill that's really going to equip people for the modern work environment.

GW: Well, so you both have signed up for a very tough job, which is to start our working group in the GOI on human skills. And I know you've been thinking about it a lot, but I know you're also just starting. How are you thinking about moving forward with this working group? And how can others help you?

CB: Yeah, so I'm glad you asked that question, now that you're here yourself. So, yeah, you've given me the task to chair this or to head this up and to work the human skills working group into the GOI. And that's very, very interesting.
And I think that the first point is to go out and get people that are passionate about this as well, but passionate in a way that they'll also be critical in terms of looking at it and making sure that whatever human skills we identify, that we know we can do something. Are they human skills that we can train? Do we understand them?
And just recently, the one around empathy-- empathy keeps on coming up as one of these human skills or soft skills. And I always sort of viewed it, I suppose, up to maybe two or three years ago, I always saw empathy as being something that-- a customer comes in. I must really listen to the customer. I must make sure that the customer knows I'm listening. I was doing a short course with the University College Dublin. And there was a guy, a lecturer from the Swedish University talking about critical thinking and problem-solving. And the point he made was that 40% of problem-solving is empathy.
So he was talking about a high-tech company and what they felt there was a gap in with the tech guys, with the guys that were building the software, was a lack of empathy.
And there's enough research to tell us that young people today don't have the same level of empathy that they had 20 years ago. So now we must look at empathy, and we must find a way to train that in, to move away in some of the other skills, like maybe growth mindset or creativity.
I think that what we have to do is we have to have the discussion. I think we've named them at this stage, and the matrix is fantastic. And there's, whatever, 24 skills, 24 human skills, in the matrix, whatever number that is. Somebody else may come up with another three or four.
But I think we've named them. Now we need to move on. I think it's time now to move on. How do we create modules of learning? How do we use those modules of learning?
Is it experiential learning? Is it something that can be taught online? Or does it have to be in the classroom where you're putting the person into the situation, just like you described there with the children around the board?
I think that's the next stage now. We've done enough talking about them. We've identified them. We've named them. But how do we create a module for comfort with ambiguity?
And I think that one is critical because the world is so disruptive. It's volatile. And somebody who likes structure, there's a lot of anxiety. Is this what's causing depression and worry and fear? Because we live in unprecedented times, we have to be more comfortable with ambiguity. I'm comfortable with ambiguity. You know, it was STEM.
STEM needs another letter or two. It can't just be STEM, because that's all technical. So which of these do we take out to help you with the work you're doing with STEM? Is it communication, collaboration, empathy, growth mindset?

So the help that people can give us that are listening to this podcast-- what questions do you have about it? What questions do you want addressed? How can you help us? So you could help us by asking really, really good questions.
And be critical. If we're going down a path where we need to fail it fairly fast, come back, see what happens-- but I think we need to move on and create the modules of learning and get them out there. Oran's articulated it very, very well. Where this is going to happen is going to be in the workplace.

GW: So I want to thank you both for sharing your insights here in the program today. It's always great to talk to you. And I want to thank also the listeners. I want to thank you for being with us for another episode of our "Beyond the Resume" podcast series for the Global Opportunity Initiative. If you have any questions, any comments, you can always contact us at goi-info@mit.edu. Thanks, everybody, and have a good day.