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LEADERSHIP & BUSINESS PODCAST

EPISODE 43: AKRAM KHAN – COMPETING WITH ROBOTS

Ken White

From the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. This is Leadership & Business. The weekly podcast that brings you the latest and best thinking from today's business leaders from across the world. We share the strategies, tactics, and information that can make you a more effective leader, communicator, and professional. I'm your host Ken White. Thanks for listening. It seems everywhere we turn, we hear about robots, technology coming into the workplace and replacing human beings. Many positions, such as cashiers, bank tellers, factory and warehouse workers, have already been replaced by technology. And as that technology becomes faster, cheaper, and more effective, it will no doubt have an effect on professionals in the workplace. Akram Khan is President of Pantheon, a software development company in Northern Virginia. Being in that space, Khan keeps a close eye on the constantly evolving technology that's disrupting work and those who work for a living. We met with Khan last week in his Arlington, Virginia office, where he shared advice on the skills employees need for the future. A future that will include more and more effective technology. Here's our conversation with the President of Pantheon, Akram Khan.

Ken White

Well, Akram, thank you for taking the time for inviting us here to the Pantheon office. It's great to sit down with you. Tell us about Pantheon and your role here.

Akram Khan

Sure, Dean White. Thank you so much for accommodating our schedule. Pantheon is a software company we build software applications for the web for the mobile for non-profits, associations. We have commercial clients. We have federal clients. We have around 100 folks on our staff. So we are constantly looking to recruit good smart people, and when we have them, we look to train that talent to constantly deliver great software for our clients, and a lot of times, we find in software it's easy to build something and have it be go out there and then be functionally fine. But we have to remember that we're developing for humans and that we are building software applications that are meant to advance a business goal or to effect change or make healthcare better and more transparent to help some of our non-profit's clients raise money and promote their

message. Well, there's that human aspect of it that we can't let go of. And so we try to bridge the gap between technology and people. It's that nexus of liberal arts.

Ken White

Yeah.

Akram Khan

We try to infuse into everything that we do, which I think makes us a little bit different. But you know there are certainly a lot of things that we know that our staff needs to constantly be improving on. And we try to accommodate those as much as possible.

Ken White

Well, one of the things we're going to talk to you today about is some of the skills that employees are going to need in the future. It's changing so quickly, especially with technology. But you actually have some headers some ideas of various advice to help employees succeed in the future. I thought we'd kind of walk through those. One of your headers is speak like the machines.

Akram Khan

So I don't mean to be alarmist, but you know I joke around, and there's a lot of you can see memes about this on the internet, but the machines are rising up, and they are getting more powerful, and there are firms like Google and Facebook and others who are building great technologies there's a lot of investment in AI and machine learning, and that has tremendous benefits for all of us as consumers. But it is also very disruptive.

Ken White

Right.

Akram Khan

Right. You know I, every time I take an Uber, the only question I ever ask is how long have you worked for Uber. Do you like working for Uber? Then in the back of mind. I'm thinking, well, they're not gonna have a job in a few years because there will be self-driving cars that'll disrupt that. And you know, as that happens, those folks move on to do something else. With this large range of disruption going on, what do, generally speaking, what do folks who may not be in software like like our teams are what do they need to consider, and one of the things is I think that everyone should have a basic literacy in coding in software development. You need to understand how programming languages work. You need to understand logic, and it's not really that hard. Some people are intimidated when I say that.

Ken White

Yes.

Akram Khan

But, Dean White, you know very well there are elementary school kids who go through online tutorials on how to write code on, how to do logic, how to create loops, and if they can learn it, so can adults. I think it's essential. One of the other things is if you are in business and you need something done. If you have the coding literacy to be able to understand what exactly has to happen, it doesn't mean that you need to build that yourself. You need to be able to understand what it takes to get that done. And we help our clients with that every day. And we're happy to do so, and they get more and more sophisticated over time. But there's a wide range of tools that folks can use to be able to get that literacy.

Ken White

Yeah, and of course, you're more valuable as an employee a much greater asset to the organization if you know what you know. Right?

Akram Khan

You absolutely are.

Ken White

Yeah. You have a phrase, map the machines.

Akram Khan

So there is, and this isn't you need to know where the machines are because they're coming to get you, but you need to understand what infrastructure is available out there. And as technology becomes more and more commoditized, it reminds me of, you know, back when I started my career in the early 90s, I was e-business was the next big thing. And then we all thought, well shouldn't just be called business.

Ken White

Yes.

Akram Khan

Right, right. And, in fact, it is. And it's a fact of the matter that you know you see all of these IT departments. They went through some disruption where their budgets were at risk because IT was becoming commoditized. But then they realized that there are other things they need to spend money on. And one of the key things is there's a tremendous amount of infrastructure available both for building applications for doing deep data

analytics. You know, long gone are the days where you need to have a data center in your office that you manage with servers you can provision that on demand in the cloud. And we do that for a number of our projects for a number of our clients, and it works really well for them. And I think that you need to have a base understanding of what's out there. I once told some students of yours that they needed to be able to think about how they could build an application in two weeks that can scale to millions of people and be lightning-fast, and they looked at me like I was crazy. And then I walk them through. Here's how you would do that. So I think that that is a key important thing, and there's things like Amazon Web Services is the biggest player, but there are others. IBM's to great amount of work there and others, and I don't want to just discount them. But there's a tremendous amount of infrastructure available that you can pull from if you want deep machine learning if you want deep data analytics, if you want to just build a mobile app if you want to build a mobile app today that replicated Tinder. I don't use Tinder.

Ken White

Right.

Akram Khan

I'm too old for that. I'm happily married, but you could do that in two weeks, and you could develop it and get it out there and have it scale immediately. Now you've got to work on your business plan and marketing plan.

Ken White

Sure.

Akram Khan

But that hard part, that barrier, is no longer there.

Ken White

Wow, amazing. Speak like the machines, map the machines, and number three, build human networks.

Akram Khan

So we've been talking a lot about the machines, and I think that one thing that the machines can't do very well is, you know, they're still not human. I think about Data from Star Trek The Next Generation, who always wanted to be a human right. He got there he transitioned a little bit, but he never was fully human, and there are plenty of examples across pop culture where that comes up. But I think that you know, there's been a lot of great literature about this. Professor Carboni at the school at the college has done a lot of work on this with Ron Cross at UVA as well, where your networks are best when they're

natural. You build them out natural I think that some people confuse building your network with developing a sales plan or marketing plan, and that's completely different.

Ken White

Right.

Akram Khan

I think that you want to develop and nurture your networks just like you would anything else in your life with relationships, and you don't want to take advantage of those relationships. So I would you know I'm not telling people to go out there and find as many people as you can and give them your business card. I think that that can be disingenuous. But you do need to build natural connections and know the alumni network is great for doing that. There are other affinity groups that people are involved in. That's all I'm talking about. Those natural interactions that you have, people just keep in touch with people naturally. You know, many people who go to the college are naturally introverted. There's this typical William & Mary person who is naturally introverted but highly curious, and you may not have a big sphere of friends. You may have a few close friends, and that's fine. You will always have acquaintances. You will always have people that you have worked with or interacted with. You need to need to build that and not abuse it. So you know, there are folks who work very, very hard, and they don't want to constantly be hearing from you that you need to buy something from them just because you know them.

Ken White

Yeah.

Akram Khan

That's abuse.

Ken White

Interesting point. And you mentioned Professor Inga Carboni. We did a podcast with Inga quite a while back on strategic networking. Saying what you're saying but took a little bit of deeper dive, so if our listeners are interested in that. I encourage them to check out that podcast with Dr. Inga Carboni.

Ken White

We'll continue our discussion with Akram Khan in just a minute. Our podcast is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at the College of William & Mary's Raymond A. Mason School of Business. The Center for Corporate Education can help you get to the next level with its certificate in business management program coming up this fall. It's a five-day program that starts on October 24th for the professional who lacks an MBA or

wants to improve on critical business and leadership skills. For more information on the certificate in business management program, visit our website at wmleadership.com. Now back to our conversation with Akram Khan, the President of Pantheon, on skills employees need for the future.

Ken White

Think globally.

Akram Khan

So this is the other half of it. You know, while one of the benefits of having all this great technology out there and all this disruption is that it, along with other factors, have really narrowed the gap between someone in the metro DC area and someone in Dubai. Someone in Singapore, you know someone in Western Europe. The connections that are there, the infrastructure that exists not only exists for building out technology applications but also for moving goods and services and people. So it is really really important that you are thinking about global reach. And there's many ways to do that. I've been very, very fortunate in that I've got an international background, and I've been able to leverage that. I've been fortunate enough to travel to the aforementioned places, and I've witnessed myself how everyone is essentially the same. We've got a more or less level playing field with good strong, educated people who are trying to do good through commerce and trade.

Ken White

Right.

Akram Khan

And there's some pushback on that politically. We're not going to talk about that in this.

Ken White

Right.

Akram Khan

But it's important as you consider the future to think about a couple of ways that you could advance yourself there. Learning another language is is not critical, but it's important. English is the ironically lingua franca now of business, right?

Ken White

Right.

Akram Khan

And anywhere you go around the world, if you speak English, you will find someone who speaks, and you'll be able to do business in English. You'll be fine. But I think that it's easier to close a deal or advance an opportunity if you can understand the culture on the other side. And that's that's really critically important. And if you don't have the aptitude or time to learn the language, it may be well enough to just understand a little bit about that culture and the mannerisms and just to get your feet wet on that. You know, there are international students who come here who have an advantage, and they are learning about America, and they're learning about, you know, mannerisms to learning about baseball which may be foreign to some of them. They're learning about American culture and sports and idioms, which is completely foreign, and that can be a challenge for them. And a lot of them do well. They get integrated in, and then they are able to contribute, and then they go back, and they're more powerful for that if they go back to their home country, and they're powerful if they stay here. So even if you don't have an international background, if you are local, it is important to give some consideration to learning. You know we have one of our employees here traveled for a year before she went to the MBA program. And it was amazing the places she went, the stories she tells, and how it expanded her mind and what is going on in the world. And I think that that's critically important.

Ken White

It is if you if I talk to a student who has done a global immersion it is amazing they say it's transformational and not just. I think sometimes we hear study abroad. We think it's just a little trip, but no doubt it can be transformational and, as you say, could be a key to a successful future. Be uniquely human. Be creative.

Akram Khan

So I guess this goes back to, you know, we, the sort of liberal arts aspect of it. We like to hire folks who can think outside the box who can be creative thinkers who can use Design Thinking to solve problems. That is extremely important. You know it's easy in software which is our domain here. It's easy to develop something functionally, but you also want to consider what the real purpose is. You want it to develop the interfaces and user experience around the humans that are using it to dissolve their pain points, and to do that on time and on budget is a great challenge, and we try to be as successful as you can on that. But I guess for other domains. It's important that if you are trying to do a sale or advance an opportunity or solve a problem, you know, look at it from the storytelling is important right? You know empathy and leveraging that is really, really important for all aspects of your life. But I think that there is. You know, I've come across folks who lacked empathy, and I saw how you know, they had had struggles with advancing their careers. And that's unfortunate. I think that it's important. You know, I once told somebody that he shouldn't be a robot. You need to have some empathy and think through things here. And

the last point on that is just naturally to be curious. I think that curiosity is often beaten out of kids in school, which is unfortunate all around the world. I mean, we have the Prussian model here, essentially. In Asia, they have some very strict models as well. I think that curiosity is what makes us uniquely human. And it is very, very important trait that has to be there.

Ken White

And your final pillar for skills employees need to succeed in the future learn new domains.

Akram Khan

So that it's, you know, we've got sort of the cultural side, we've got the curiosity side. You know, I was a political science government major at the college, and now I'm president of technology company which tells you that you need to always be looking outside of your comfort zone, whether it's with the books you read or you know I'm not telling you need to go learn anatomy and learn to become a doctor. That's a highly specific set of skills where I want my doctors to be trained correctly. Right. But if you don't understand finance learn a little bit about finance. If you don't understand supply chain, learn a little bit about that. If you know if you're not naturally a computer scientist, you know learning how to code is learning a new domain as an example. I think that that is important to give you breadth so that, as you know, if you're in a position which could get disrupted by any one of the things that we've talked about, globalization or technology, you have more to fall back on, and you're more valuable as an individual to any potential employer. And if you're an entrepreneur, it's essential you are wearing many hats. So entrepreneurs, by default, have to learn every domain. And you know, getting an MBA may not be enough for some of these guys. They have to learn about esoteric things with regulations that they've never had to dream about, but you gotta learn.

Ken White

It seems that disruption is absolutely everywhere. Of course, we're alive right now, and this is our life. Is it really? Do you think is the world as disruptive as we're making it sound like it is? I mean, there was disruption before, but we sort of talk about it a lot.

Akram Khan

It has been accelerated, and you see a lot of concentration and the factors that we talked about, globalization and the emergence of ubiquitous technology. You know Mary Meeker slides that she posted yesterday that she presented on at the Ricoh conference talk about how there is a rapid acceleration of disruption. Disruption with capital markets, with technology, globalization, with infrastructure. It is something where you may not realize it today. You may be working away and plodding away, and you're good. But you always have to in the back. You might be thinking, how could this area that I'm working in be disrupted? Not everything will go away, but you've got to think about it. Maybe it's a little

nerve-wracking to consider that you know there are large swaths of the population where robots may be able to do the work that they do, and are they now expendable?

Ken White

Right.

Akram Khan

What should we do about them from a public policy standpoint from a human standpoint? You know how do they need to prepare to be able to better earn and provide for their families.

Ken White

So the message is it's changing, and in order to compete, you better be ready and be willing.

Akram Khan

You've got to be ready and the folks who ignore that fact, whether you're an individual or your company or your country or your region or your culture. You're going to be in trouble. And we see that every day.

Ken White

That's our conversation with Akram Khan. And that's our podcast for this week. Leadership & Business is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at the College of William & Mary's Raymond A. Mason School of Business. The Center for Corporate Education can help you, and your organization get to the next level with business and leadership development programs that specifically fit your needs. If you're interested in learning more about the opportunities at the Center for Corporate Education for you or your organization, visit our website at wmleadership.com. That's wmleadership.com. Thanks to our guest this week Akram Khan and thanks to you for joining us. I'm Ken White. Until next time have a safe, happy, and productive week.