TRANSCRIPT – Community Conversations Episode #100

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SPEAKERS

Shannon Abram, Allison Brotman, Jim Storer

Jim Storer 00:06
Hello, and welcome to another edition of community conversations. My name is Jim store. I'm the founder of the Community Roundtable. And I'm joined today by my capable co host Shannon Abram Shannon. Jen,

Shannon Abram 00:17
we have a longtime friend of the Community Roundtable and a longtime member of the network, who has been with us across multiple companies, one of our favorite people. Allison Brockman. Hi, Allison.

Allison Brotman 00:30
Hi, Shannon. Hi, Jim.

Shannon Abram 00:32
We're super excited to chat with you today. Even though we know you very well, if you could take a minute and introduce yourself. And then tell us a little bit about where you work and the kind of community you work with there.

Allison Brotman 00:42
So my name is Alison Brockman, I'm the vice president of learning and community at UK G. And if you're not familiar with UK, G, we are the only HR technology powered by a great place to work to deliver both the technology and the insights needed to unlock greatness in your business. And throughout my career, I've held a number of leadership roles across learning and community and a wide range of industries. It was really my passion for the customer experience that led me to community management and to the community roundtable about eight or nine, maybe 10 years ago. So I've had the privilege of leading for community build to launch initiatives. I live in Wilmington, North Carolina with my husband, two teenage sons and a wine. Reiner, it's amazing.

Jim Storer 01:34

You already answered one of our questions from the tail end of the podcast. So we'll get to that later. But I want to start off, you've been doing a lot of work in merging community and learning, can you tell us a little bit more about that process and journey and kind of what you've been what you've been working on there? Sure, I'd

Allison Brotman 01:52

be happy to. So the use case of bringing customer learning and community together is really great for software as a service organizations where product adoption is just paramount. You know, at a SAS organization, we want customers using the product driving real value from it using our products and services to achieve their desired business outcomes. And if we do this, well, then our likelihood of renewal and upsell increases with that customer. So in a SAS organization, all departments really play an important role in driving product adoption. So back to the learning and the community piece. You know, for the learning function, we have to provide learning experiences that are engaging so that learners, you know, are building their knowledge and building confidence and they keep coming back to us throughout their product journey. They're using more features and more functions and using them better. And when we release product updates, they understand what those updates include. And they adopt those and they become proficient with those two. So those are all characteristics of product adoption and the byproducts of our Customer Training and the online community piece, you know, the platform, the network of peers, this has the incredible potential to really extend that learning experience and to drive so much greater engagement. And the learning practitioner and me knows that there isn't a one size fits all strategy for adult learning. Most adults, you know, learn on the job, right when they're actively doing the work through those on the job experiences. We also learn socially, right by collaborating with team members and by making industry connections. And then sometimes we choose to learn through more organized and formal training that we intentionally register and, and complete to expand our knowledge. So at UKG, we created a learning community and adoption team to create a blended learning experience strategy that offers all those things formal social, and on the job product learning experiences to customers through this self service experience that's offered through our community. And we did this to accommodate you know, all those different learning styles and really to maximize customer engagement. And we have all of the traditional kind of offerings that a community would have, right? So you can, in addition to finding all of that product learning and content, you can also find existing product ideas and vote on them or submit a new idea. And of course, when you need that extra help from UKG. The community is very good to access UKG services and support as well. So you mentioned

Shannon Abram 04:35

that you have community learning team. When you think about hiring for those roles. Are the traditional skills of a community professional aligned with your approach or is there a need for learning specialists

Allison Brotman 04:48

separately? Good question. We're not hiring differently, or different roles per se. We're asking these two roles or these two types of teams to work closely together. So if you think back to middle school science, that's where I am at home. It's that symbiotic relationship like mutualism, where both benefit, right? So community enables the customer learning and customer learning enables community. Right. So they're enabling each other. It's really a beautiful thing. You know, some examples are our

instructors are showing up in the community, and sharing knowledge beyond the classroom. Right, our learning Readiness Team and learning strategy team is understanding what's coming from product early on, and feeding that into our content creation. And we're building plans to drive customer engagement around that. I know often communities are challenged with resourcing. Right, whether it's resourcing for events, or content creation, those are built in skill sets and to most learning teams. So I really find it's very mutually beneficial.

Jim Storer 05:59
You know, I'm always interested in how different activities influence engagement in the community in general. And I'm wondering if you're seeing a boost in engagement from people who take the training are involved in the training program? Is it a good way to potentially onboard or get people more familiar with the community? In general?

Allison Brotman 06:18
I think it is, we see a strong connection between customers who complete training and kind of show up to different learning events, as well as are engaged in the community that could be engaged in group discussions or asking and answering questions. We see a really strong relationship between those behaviors, as well as behavior of renewing with us. So customers that are engaging in our learning and engaging in our community behaviors are also more likely to renew with UKG, which is pretty exciting. Absolutely.

Jim Storer 06:56
That's that's one that the executives love to see happen, right? That's right.

Shannon Abram 07:01
So I can just imagine all these account managers out there ears are perking up, like oh, we like increased renewals. If a company isn't already, especially maybe a SASS company isn't already thinking about bringing community and learning together. Where do you start? So

Allison Brotman 07:15
I would start by identifying a very specific business need, and then put together that cross functional kind of team to really target a specific goal, work together to achieve that goal, measure your results, and then have that kind of internal conversation about where and how this group can make their biggest impact. Can they make it working cross functionally now that these bridges have been built? Or can they make the biggest impact by coming together and aligning more closely and on a more regular basis as a shared team? Could

Shannon Abram 07:53
you share an example of how your team thought about this as you're getting started, like a problem you are looking to solve or a challenge we're trying to help customers with

Allison Brotman 08:02
short one of the things we were really trying to do what you know, once we heard this result that our data scientists told us, you know, the impact that community engagement and learning engagement

have on renewals, we really wanted to drive more engagement, right, we wanted to help our business achieve greater results. So we set out to measure account engagement across all of our customer accounts. And then to understand more about what those customers are doing what they're finding value in. So we are about one year in to our new UKG community going live. So we went live about a year ago, mid May. And we're already seeing some pretty great results in this area. So we have 74% of our customer accounts across this is 19,000 accounts that are engaging. So that's pretty exciting. And then when we look at at that group of 74% 58% of those are about 11,000 of those customer accounts are actually creating and contributing content to the community. So that's really exciting to us to have such a broad group of participation, such a generous customer base that's really leaning in. And it helps us kind of validate that we're on our way to creating that community that builds user knowledge, confidence and excitement in our own products and services. Wow.

Jim Storer 09:28
So hearing those engagement numbers you're blowing away are kind of what we see as norms in the industry. I'm wondering if you can point to any specific programs that beyond what you're doing with integrating learning and community that you can point to that are really impacting overall engagement?

Allison Brotman 09:47
Well, you know, UKG is the result of ultimate software and Kronos merging. And it can be really tricky to navigate bringing to legacy community pieced together, and the engagement programs and the super user programs from those legacy organizations. And I think one of the things that our team has done really well is understanding what was important to those users who are engaging in those legacy communities, and bringing that forward into our new UKG community. So maybe it evolves a little bit, but the essence or the spirit of it is the same. And then we also created this hall of fame program for our legacy super users. And we invited them in to complete user acceptance testing of our new community, and to help us support the rollout. You know, as we kind of phased our rollout with our, our new community, because it was just, there's so much work when you're rolling out a new community, and they showed up tremendously to help support us during this time. That is

Shannon Abram 11:00
amazing. I feel like this podcast is gonna make a lot of people jealous, but in a nice way, like an aspirational jealousy, I think is always a good thing. I have two little kids, and I'm always telling them that some peer pressure is bad. And then some peer pressure is okay, like you it's okay to want to go on that roller coaster because your friend is going on. So I think inspiring other listeners is a great thing here.

Allison Brotman 11:19
We're all on our journey. So we're happy to share more about our engagement programs, we're in the process of rolling out our new UKG superuser program, you know, I'd be happy for our community managers to share more about that with the network, we love to give back to how we got to where we are, you know, by getting great support from the network and from our community management community. So we're always happy to give back to,

Shannon Abram 11:44

we would love to hear from them. And I at the risk of embarrassing you or throwing you for a loop, I would be remiss if we didn't mention that you were the 2023, recipient of the community Champion Award at the Community Leadership Awards last year. And so congratulations. Thank

Allison Brotman 12:03
you. I'm glad we're not on camera. So you can't see me blushing.

Shannon Abram 12:06
I know, I'm sorry. But we can't not mention this. And you were nominated by your team, which is incredible. And our guests, our podcast, guests tend to be more on the community manager level versus have more executive level guests. And I think our listeners would love to hear just from your perspective, the things that make you happiest about your team, the things your team does that delights you. What can you recommend other community managers do that would really get their boss's attention?

Allison Brotman 12:37
That's a multi part question. No, I'm

Shannon Abram 12:40
sorry. I'm sorry.

Allison Brotman 12:42
So I think one of the things that our team does really well, is listen. And I hope if they were here, they would say that I listen well, but I think they listen well. So we started our community project. With a listening tour, there was a lot of people, leaders, peers, maybe even some people on the team that were like, let's just go do it. We know what we need. But we started with a listening tour. And our whole team divided up the interviews, we aligned on the questions we were going to ask. And then we compiled all of the feedback, and the team synthesized it for themes. And it was so insightful. And I should add that we asked our customers, our third party partners and our employees at all levels, you know, C suite all the way to frontline employees, picking up the phones with customers, what did they need in a new community. And we learned so much. And we baked that into our strategy. And it was really important. You know, once you hear how the community has the potential to impact another business function, or another individual, it really became their mission to incorporate it in our strategy, and to make sure that it was holistic, and it represented the business. And that once we had that personal relationship with that individual, we could go back to them and say, Hey, you said this was a pain point, or you said this was an opportunity. Here's how I incorporated that, you know, here's the user story that solves that problem, or here's the programming, we're going to wrap around it to get you what you need. And we have found that has just been so positive for our team. And then the other thing that we did, you know, we had a really big project. So, again, we were part of a merger. And this was not just a community project, right? We were implementing the technology for our whole new value stream of how to serve customers. So it was big and complicated. We had to balance scope, and time and cost and we had to make trade offs and We just kept coming back together to each other. And I really tried to empower my team members on the ground to make decisions. And I think initially, they were a little bit uncomfortable by that. But they realized that this project and the act of bringing two

communities together, and representing our team during this project, it was a little bit of professional development and growth kind of baked into it itself. And I trusted them to figure it out. And I knew that if we could learn together, and we could talk through it together, that we would figure it out, together, but they made so many of those decisions, and we met endlessly during that timeframe. But I do think it was really impactful to have the team members kind of closest to the work making the decisions, who needed to be part of that conversation or that work stream, which user stories must move forward, which ones could we put on a later phase? How are we going to execute our testing all of those details, all of those decisions the team made,

Jim Storer 16:04
I think one of the really interesting aspects of the work that you've done, and I remember when the merger happened, and you were kind of grappling with this idea of bringing the communities together, because Cronos had had a very strong community as well. And it's not easy to bring together two cultures like that. It's it's not a slam dunk, that it's going to work every time. And the one aspect that I'd love your comment on, because in this day and age, we have a lot of executives, believing the only way you can get complex work done. And I would consider this project that you've been on for years is a pretty complex project. And you talked about how the team members work so well together. I think executives think that you need to be in the same office in order to make that happen. And and to do that effectively. There's this whole Return to Work mantra that's happening across industries. And so as community professionals, we know that work can get done remotely. And I know that your team is is geographically dispersed. So can you talk a little bit about how you were able to come together so effectively and get this complex project done and done well, while still predominantly working from different geographical areas,

Allison Brotman 17:19
I think there's a couple ingredients that led to our success here. So first, I think is all about the relationships and all about building trust with your team and building open lines of communication with your team, with your stakeholders, with your business partners with your customers, right, because even our customers knew that we were in this time of transition, and one community was going away and this new community was coming trust was probably the most important ingredient for us. And then we had to have some structure. And we had to have accountability. Right. So not all meetings are created the same, right? Some meetings are standups. Some are project meetings where we're providing kind of a broad status on project, or others. We're going deep. Right? We're workshopping, we are trying to understand something so that we can make an informed decision about what our future state will look like. There are other meetings where we're, we're making a decision, we just, we had to be really intentional. Why are we getting together? What is the outcome? What is the role you need to play and just be really intentional about our time, because you can imagine how much time and energy this took at some points, right? People are emotionally drained, or you're just really tired from all of this big, complex kind of heavy work. So we also did really fun things together, virtually, we did this team building event where somebody took us on a virtual bike ride. So the guide was on a bike ride going through Paris and showing us a cathedral that was in renovations, we had plants and cactus shipped to our house. And we potted them together and thought through that Zen moment together what we were planting what we hoped for. So we also did some non work things together, too.

Jim Storer 19:13
I like the structure that you shared around trust, structure and accountability. And I do think you talked about that fun exercise near the end there. And I think that's part of helping to build that trust, right and building you're trying to build a team. It's a fascinating kind of conundrum that organizations are struggling with right now. So it's always nice to hear a practitioners perspective and how you got it to work and clearly it worked. So I'm going to kind of transition us here we love to ask some less complex, less triple phased questions just kind of clear and simple ones for you. So we'll kick off the speed round now and this is what I was alluding to at the top which is I'm pretty sure your team dog versus Team Cat although you may be both I'm Team dog. Totally an all in on Team dog.

Allison Brotman 19:57
Yes. We

Shannon Abram 19:59
now but now Now you do have to pass the dog tax by giving us a picture of your dog to play with the podcast when we publish it. I'd

Allison Brotman 20:06
be happy to. I appreciate if we were on video you would see her in the background on that sofa. She likes to do a couple different yoga poses or she likes to sleep. Dogs are living my best life.

Jim Storer 20:19
We all have dogs that to yoga, it sounds like

Shannon Abram 20:22
what are you binging right now?

Allison Brotman 20:24
Well, foodwise strawberries are in season in North Carolina right now. So strawberry everything just had some fresh homemade strawberry ice cream, strawberries on waffles. Surveys with anything. Are you operating a bed

Jim Storer 20:40
and breakfast there? Can I call?

Shannon Abram 20:44
Her teenagers? She kind of is.

Allison Brotman 20:48
That's right. And then TV. We just finished watching a lot of NCAA basketball. So women's and men's NCAA basketball tournament was really exceptional to watch this year.

Jim Storer 21:01

It was exciting. I don't know if you saw Caitlin Clark on Saturday Night Live. But if your family watched a lot of the the tournament, it's it's worth a view. They'll get a kick out of it.

Allison Brotman 21:10
I'll have to check that out. You don't usually stay up that late. Oh, I never

Jim Storer 21:17
use the DVR to its full capacity. That's right. So we know that you are predominantly work from home. Do you have a favorite hack to help make you more efficient in the office? In your house?

Allison Brotman 21:27
I try to move during the day. So stand up, walk around, stretch, change the way I'm sitting, take the dog for a quick little walk, do yoga with your dog. I try to I think just moving getting a change in perspective, getting the blood pumping and flowing. It's all really helpful. What is your favorite dessert? So outside of strawberries recently, my normal sweet treat is something that brings together chocolate and peanut butter like peanut butter m&ms or Reese's cups. My

Shannon Abram 22:01
daughter is seven and she just we just celebrated Easter and she discovered that so she just had, you know, peanut butter cups before. But she got a cup some of those like Reese's eggs in her. And she was like, Why did they taste so much better? And we had a long conversation about like the chocolate peanut butter ratio and how it's different for some people. And she was like this is she's like, I need to do some experiments. As I look. I love that quote.

Allison Brotman 22:25
Yes, I would agree. The bunnies and eggs are better than the normal Reese's cup.

Jim Storer 22:31
Okay, so to the keen listeners, I think else too may have already answered this, but I'm going to give you a chance to answer it again. So what is your community superpower?

Allison Brotman 22:40
That's a tough question. I think building community teams that build communities that align to business objectives that really bring real value.

Jim Storer 22:49
And I just didn't hear you talk about the work that you've you do. I agree with that. And I also think that one of the ways that you do that is by being a participatory leader. And so I was thinking of listening. And and I think as a leader, you listen really intently, and make sure that everyone who's a part of your team is as a voice and is incorporated in the strategy or the the ideas that are being generated. So I think that's what I was taking away from our conversation today.

Allison Brotman 23:17
Thank you, Jim. Very generous of you.

Shannon Abram 23:20
So final question, who are what is your community inspiration?

Allison Brotman 23:24
So first, my team, they are incredible. They have different backgrounds, different experiences, they came to community management in different ways, different levels of expertise. And they are absolutely incredible. They show up every day, to manage our community to meet our customers and our employee members who participate wherever they are, and to give them the best experience. They're really amazing. I couldn't have asked for a better team. And then I think the second inspiration is more external, you know, like, where do I go for community inspiration. And I think there's so many great external communities available right now for inspiration right in our lives as consumers communities are more popular Reddit just IPO mode. There's consultants talking about community everywhere. When I started and community management maybe 910 years ago, nobody was talking about it. When you posted job or community manager, they thought you were looking for an apartment manager or homeowners association. And there's just so much buzz and energy and excitement around community management now and I think it's really exciting and inspiring. So we don't have to invent it now. We can look around us and see how others are doing things and what's working well. I think that's really exciting.

Jim Storer 24:54
Right answer. Love it. Well, thank

Shannon Abram 24:55
you so much for joining us today. I know you are super busy. Yeah and it's always wonderful to talk to you

Jim Storer 25:01
that was fun thank you

Allison Brotman 25:03
thanks for having me I really appreciate the opportunity to share what's going on here at UKG thanks

Shannon Abram 25:08
for listening to another episode of community conversations with the Community Roundtable