

Building Brain Capital With Harris Eyre (S5:EP5) Transcript

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Chris: Here's a news headline you don't hear everyday: our global brain capital stock is declining. At least, that's according to my guest today, neuroscientist Harris Ayere.

Welcome to Work Better, a Steelcase podcast where we think about work and ways to make it better. I'm your host Chris Congdon and I'm here with our producer Katie Pace. Hi Katie.

Katie: Hi Chris. Okay, I gotta ask, what is global brain capital and why is it declining?

Chris: Well you'll have to listen to Harris to more fully understand it, but the idea is that with the rise of anxiety, depression, Alzheimer's and other health issues, collectively our brains are stressed and not able to perform as well at work. He and his colleagues are on a mission to boost brain capital and change this. In fact, his bio is really interesting. Will you share it with us?

Katie: Sure. Harris is a senior fellow for brain capital at Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute and provides advisory expertise across public, non profit and private sectors. He is an instructor with the Global Brain Health Institute and an adjunct with the University of California, San Francisco. He's also an entrepreneur dedicated to creating awareness, knowledge, skills, and leadership for the brain-positive economic transition, stopping and reversing the loss of global brain capital.

If you learn as much from this conversation as we did, remember to like it and share it with a friend or colleague. Here's the conversation.

CC: Thank you for joining us on Work Better, Harris.

HE: Thanks for having me, Chris. Glad to be here.

CC: I'm glad too because, first of all, I've never met anybody who is the executive director of a Brain Capital Alliance. That alone is a really fascinating name for an organization, and I'd like to talk about that as well as how the workplace can help support brain health. But first, just to set the base for everybody, all the work that you are doing is based on this premise that brain capital is declining. So I'd love it if you could just talk about what that means when you say that. Because in some ways, I would think it's a little counterintuitive. We have more access to more information than ever before. So you would think that our brain power is accelerating. So let's talk about brain capital and what the situation is you see right now.

HE: Wonderful. Yes. So my colleagues and I at the Brain Capital Alliance, we do believe that the global brain capital stock is declining. And we have a couple of data points that I'll share that explain why we think this. The first is that data suggests that the cost of mental and neurological conditions across the lifespan, from autism in kids to depression in adults to Alzheimer's, is costing the global economy \$2.2 trillion a year. That's in healthcare costs and in lost economic productivity in the workplace. And this is rising at about 5% a year, would you believe? No matter what doctors, public health people, and scientists are doing right now, we're really not getting a handle on this. So that really concerns us because mental and neurological conditions are commonly associated with disability, despair, and lack of well-being. And so that definitely impacts our economy in the workplace. And then, of course, we think about our brains. We think about during COVID, many kids had learning challenges getting to school or engaging in school. So this array of brain health issues and a lack of brain skills are really acute right now, which leads us to believe that brain capital is reducing, which we're concerned about. And so what we do at the Brain Capital Alliance is we study this and think about how to resolve this. And that's where this idea of the brain economy transition comes in. How do we go from the current state of our economy and society, which is depleting brain capital, to a place where we're building brain capital? That's sort of a positive brain economy, and that's where, of course, the workplace is essential because we spend about a third of our lives in the workplace.

CC: Yeah, we were having issues with anxiety and depression increasing before we ever hit the pandemic. I'm really curious if the pandemic and living in this kind of perpetual state of anxiety and fear, do you think that exacerbated the problem?

HE: I definitely do, Chris. I think that COVID-19 was particularly problematic. It's problematic across the lifespan, particularly problematic in children and youth. We saw delays in the development of young children between zero and ten. And in the age group of about ten to eighteen, we saw a really significant spike in depression, anxiety, and suicidal thinking. And then, of course, even adults. I could speak personally that I was not doing so well psychologically during the COVID pandemic. So it definitely,

CC: I don't think any of us were.

HE: And that's the good thing about the pandemic is that stigma lifted, right? We can kind of all talk about how challenging it was, and so that was an issue, but it did unlock opportunities to talk about this, right? You saw political leaders, business leaders, and influencers all talking about it, so that's great. But it's just one crisis, which is part of this polycrisis constellation that we see where the spread of global infectious diseases is one thing that causes this anxiety, as you mentioned. But on top of that, we have the rise of generative AI, which went from nowhere to everywhere.

CC: And

HE: That's good in many ways, but it's also causing people a lot of stress, just trying to figure out how to use it and whether it means their job's going to be lost, or it means they have to learn more skills. And we've seen a rise in, obviously, misinformation and disinformation. Climate issues have been accelerating as well as political polarization. So this is a COVID dynamic that we initially mentioned here, but there is a constellation of things that we now call the polycrisis, and that really fuels the anxiety of people.

CC: Yeah, I'm glad you brought that up because I wanted to better understand this concept of a polycrisis. So what I'm hearing you say is there's just, for any of us as human beings, dealing maybe with one or two crises at a time is a lot, but now it feels like it's on every front. Everything around us feels like it's in this state of perpetual tension. Is that right?

HE: Yes. Yes. I believe it. I feel it. I think my friends and colleagues feel it. And of course, we see it coming out in the data. The United Nations Human Development Report came out a couple of weeks ago and showed that levels of uncertainty and the associated anxiety are definitely rising, and it's because of the polycrisis and the acceleration of these problems of misinformation and disinformation, AI, climate, etc. And so what that makes me think about, Chris, is how, in a simplistic way, when we have fear and anxiety, that's our amygdala, the sort of almond-shaped lizard brain part of our brain. So I think that the nice way of thinking about this in simple terms is that the amygdala, our amygdala, is on fire as a country, as a global brain, if you will, made up of 7 billion brains. Our amygdala is on fire, and we really need to think about ways of calming that fire. And that's where some neocortex frontal lobe is the firefighter that can help us to douse the flames of the amygdala fire that we have.

CC: So Harris, these issues as part of the polycrisis, I mean, they're so big, and I wonder for people who are listening to this show who are leaders in business, how do you even begin to think about that? Because, I mean, these issues are at a societal level, governmental organizations are struggling, huge organizations like the World Economic Forum, none of us are seemingly able to solve it. I'm just wondering how we break that down and think about it in a way that it does feel like we can actually begin to approach the problem in some way.

HE: Yeah, absolutely. We need this to feel manageable, and we all have, we're empowered to do something about it no matter what sort of walk of life we come from. So I think on the big macro end, we have just for people that are interested, if they want to learn about this out of curiosity, we have a global brain capital dashboard that's being published. We're about to launch a brain economy lab, which will assess the current state of the global brain and solutions for how to resolve that through different sectors: education, health, built environment, online, environmental, etc. So that's just for people that are interested, and we can share links with people on that. But to get to your question more specifically, businesses do have a role to play in public-private solutioning for big-scale problems. So if businesses are interested in a little bit philanthropically engaging in this, then that's great. But more core to this, Chris, is this point that we spend a third of our lives in the workplace and the private sector, and that's the engine of our economy really. And so we do need to get to, and let's talk about that today, solutions that businesses, managers, HR people, CEOs, CFOs can engage so they can do something about this just in the context of their world. If we all do something in the world that we can influence in our world of work, then that's a good start, right?

CC: Yeah. So I want to talk more about opportunities at work. And I'd like to start in one area, which is neurodiversity. I was having lunch with a group of clients recently, and someone asked at the table what neurodiversity is, and it surprised me a little bit because I feel like in some circles it's very well understood, but in other circles, people are still trying to understand. And I wonder if you could just, for our audience, give a quick definition, but then let's talk about what we need to do in the workplace to think about people who are neurodiverse.

HE: So neurodiversity classically is people that have really moderate to severe brain disorders. Autism and dyslexia are the two most common things that people know about. And we traditionally, of course, think about those people as being extremely impaired and they almost can't even engage in the workplace. But as the science, the neuroscience of these disorders has advanced, we realized that actually there's a lot of gradations from the fact that all of us have a degree of brain difference.

Actually, our brains are like fingerprints. They're all uniquely different. Chris, your brain is different from my brain. We have different strengths and weaknesses, and it's actually a gradation from everyone's brain being different all the way through to mild, moderate, severe.

And in the world of work, there's a recognition that we shouldn't just leave people on the sidelines that have traditional disorders of neurodiversity, like autism and dyslexia. We need to really think about engaging them in the world of work. And so that means companies need to really think hard about personalizing the working opportunities and workplace environment for people that are living with some degree of brain difference. And so that's a big part of this brain economy movement.

And there are some wonderful pieces, like from the Rand organization, that developed a nice framework for how to include people that are neurodiverse actually in the national security workforce and engage their talents. People on the ASD spectrum often have really incredible analytic capabilities, and people with dyslexia often have really incredible creative capabilities. So how do we work more effectively and integrate and be inclusive in the workplace?

CC: I also want to talk about anxiety in the workplace. One of the things we get asked about a lot as Gen Z is becoming a larger portion of the workforce, about to be 30% of the workforce and coming in with higher levels of anxiety than other generations. Are there things that you would think about differently or that business leaders should be thinking about specifically there from a brain economy perspective?

HE: Yeah, it's like a complete sea change in the workplace with Gen Z's concerns about an open disclosure of their mental health issues and their actual demand for care and personalization and company-wide change. So it's like this is big stuff that you've pointed to. Again, I think businesses are in no position but to think about how they personalize and tailor to Gen Z as much as possible and try to create a bit of intergenerational understanding in their business from baby boomer through to Gen Z. People will kind of have to understand that they're all in the boat together in the company and that they're all valid and have valid concerns and interests. And so we do see, Chris, we need to think with Gen Z about how do we recruit and create a mentally healthy workplace. That's part of how you entice and recruit Gen Z, and different packages of well-being and mental health care actually is how you retain Gen Z and get the best out of them performance-wise, but then also with their well-being. So it does require a lot of thinking, and we have seen many mental health companies moving into that space to help corporations to provide solutions to Gen Z, but it's a whole leadership thing as well. Again, CEOs and chief human resource officers really need to think hard about what they are doing for Gen Z and how they could do it better.

CC: So, I want to hit on the other end of the generational spectrum, and I was really intrigued about your work in terms of thinking about dementia prevention in the workplace. I think everybody who gets to a certain age and forgets where they left their keys begins to worry about dementia. Is work helping or hurting? What do you think about that?

HE: It's incredible that we are talking about dementia prevention in the workplace. Again, it used to be that we thought of dementia as affecting people way past retirement, but it turns out as dementia research has evolved, dementia prevention starts with people at about my age—I'm 35. There's this whole groundswell at a public health level that dementia prevention and just general brain health, we call it now, starts in your middle age. And so where do people in middle age spend most of their time? In the workplace. And so, I've been very much involved with a new organization called the Business Collaborative for Brain Health, which is focused on data around this issue and then solutions around this issue. And we've worked to engage a lot of different private companies in that discussion and developing scorecards for companies and then ultimately toolkits. The point is that dementia prevention starts in the workplace in mid-age. And if we want to frankly get more performance out of people's brains, then if we keep them more brain healthy, we'll get more productivity, creativity, well-being, and social cohesion from a business perspective. Part of this is moral and ethical, and part of this is just straight up what's good for your business. Brain health is like the brain health of your employees is the engine for your company's productivity.

CC: That makes so much sense. There's another topic that's been in the news a lot as well that I just want to hit on. And I feel like we're not giving you enough time to really go as deep as we could. So I know that our listeners are going to want to have more to read after we're done. But loneliness is another topic that I would say five years ago, I don't think I ever talked to anybody in a business role who worried about loneliness, that that was somebody's personal problem, didn't have anything to do with work. But now I think we're acknowledging that there are issues in terms of people feeling loneliness at work. What are you seeing about that?

HE: It is another big mega trend, and I think, Chris, what we're hitting on today from neurodiversity to mental health to dementia to loneliness is like these brain mega trends.

Maybe that needs to be the title of this episode. Social isolation for sure is a challenge for the entire nation of America. And we just talk about America for the purpose of isolation. We've seen Vivek Murthy, the Surgeon General, release reports about isolation, the perceptions of isolation spiking across the lifespan, youth and older adults in general. And so it's a real issue and companies, again, have a role to play. It's all about community and trying to support people to not just engage socially online and digitally, but there's something about face-to-face. And so there's this thing where your social, let's call it your social muscle, needs to be exercised to be strong and to allow you to engage in a nice way in social conversations. And so if you stay at home all the time and you're fully remote, your social muscle can atrophy. But likewise, if you are in the workplace a hundred percent, you may also think you're kind of exhausted, particularly for introverts, your social muscle maybe just can't handle that level of, that's too much social engagement.

So there is this middle ground and we all probably have a different middle ground. Chris, yours and mine are different. How many days a week in person at work is important for the social muscle? And we need to recognize that. And I certainly feel this, there is some anxiety, right? When you go from not working around people to being around like 50 people, it's overwhelming. It takes a while for your brain to settle that. But we have to do it. We have to challenge ourselves. But managers and leaders need to recognize that people do get a little bit anxious when they're re-engaging face-to-face in a high-intensity scenario. So, I think developing tools and practices for businesses is key. And Chris, your other point, we've skimmed the wave tops of a lot of issues today, but that's the point of the brain economy transition. We're really trying to take a systematic approach and a systemic approach to how we improve people's brain capital. So, this is exactly in keeping with the point of our work.

CC: In that vein, you have a scorecard that helps organizations assess the brain health in their company. I think that sounds fascinating. Can you talk about how you go about scoring brain health?

HE: Yes, absolutely. So, this was mentioned publicly a couple of weeks ago. It was launched and it's from the Business Collaborative for Brain Health. So, if anyone wants to learn about this, just Google that and you'll find their scorecard tab. This is the first in the world. It's a scorecard. It's a collaboration between that collaborative, Hero Health, and MA. And it starts off with a questionnaire where leaders can fill out and different people from the company can fill out how they think their company is scoring on brain health practices and understandings. And it's from a strategic level to EAP programs, it's a very comprehensive analysis of what your company is doing in anything related to brain health: nutrition, food, flexible work, well-being, you name it, all those things relevant to brain health. And then you get a score and then a series of personalized recommendations for what you can do for your company around improving the brain health of your company. And the great thing is that we have now a couple dozen big corporations that are engaging, and we also have the ability to track companies' performance over time. And potentially this opens up the opportunity to do a rank score and look at which is the best company in America in brain health. And then the ultimate goal is to start to try to compare brain health with the performance of the company.

CC: Yeah, this is interesting, and I also want to tie it back to we're always thinking about the workplace and the physical environment. Last season we talked to NDA, who I know you've worked with, who's been doing a lot of thinking about brain-healthy cities and workplaces. And I'm interested in hearing what you think about if you were giving advice to design professionals or people who are responsible for workplaces, what are some of the things that we can do from that perspective that would help with brain health at work?

HE: Absolutely. Firstly, I would say that I would tell them, Hey, you guys are super important. Don't undersell the vital importance that you have in the brain economy transition where we're trying to go from depleting brain capital to building brain capital. It's kind of abstract. And so if you talk about it in literally concrete terms of design and buildings, what's a bad design and building to a good one, that helps people understand what I'm talking about. And so I have enjoyed working with Ali and increasingly working with other private companies and academics in this space. So I would tell design architecture firms, actually, please come and join us. We're about to launch a nonprofit called Building Brains.

CC: Oh, cool.

HE: Where it's going to be a repository of private, public, philanthropic actors and academics where we try to develop brain capital design and building standards and develop pilot projects. So we're starting to engage more with developers that have the money to pay for these projects. So I'd say come talk to us, but then please for sure follow what we're doing with HKS and also Perkins and Will. And I should say, Chris, just a final point on this is that I live with migraine with visual aura as a sort of condition that I've had for my whole life. Fortunately, now it's well managed by a new medication that came out. But I think about the built environment a lot now because when I get strong bright light in the corner of my eye and it's otherwise kind of dark in a room, it really sort of makes me a little dizzy. And it's a known phenomenon for migraineurs that have visual auras. And so I'm always now thinking about the environment that I'm in. So the built environment piece is very personal for me, and I can now kind of tell the difference between good and bad design and neuroarchitecture.

CC: It is something that we've spent some time thinking about as well, because traditionally workplaces are always based on the idea of getting work done, of course, and productivity. But sometimes we need to have spaces that are really supporting our humanity, I guess, for lack of a better word, because if those needs aren't taken care of, if you don't have a place that you can go if you feel a migraine coming on, if I don't have a place that I can go if I'm starting to feel sick to my stomach or overwhelmed at work, those things actually help us be more productive at work because then we know that our needs are getting met and that we don't have to stress about what am I going to do if something like that happens to me? So I think it's a really important topic. I'm glad that you're going to spend more time exploring that. So Harris, I just want to say I think this has been such an important conversation for us to have and for our listeners, we are going to put some things in the show notes to have some additional reading and some additional resources because it's a really important thing for us to think about the needs of people to be able to help not deplete our brain health for organizations. So I'm really grateful that you were able to join us today on Work Better.

HE: Well, thanks so much for having me, Chris, and I am glad this has been a good discussion and I look forward to following up with folks that are interested to talk more.

CC: Perfect. Thank you.

Chris: Katie, can you tell us about our guest next week?

Katie: Next week we're talking with researcher and consultant Sean Gallagher all about the rise of generative AI – and why we shouldn't be afraid of it.

Chris: I don't know... I'm slightly worried it might take our jobs.

Katie: He says it's time for leaders to step up and prepare their employees for AI at work, and when they do employees who use AI on a daily basis have higher satisfaction with their jobs and even report a better work-life balance.

Chris: I was really inspired to use AI more within our work after this conversation, you won't want to miss it.

If you enjoyed this conversation would you subscribe or share it with a friend? You can also visit us at steelcase.com/research to sign up for weekly updates on research, insights or design ideas delivered right to your inbox.

Thanks again for being here and we hope your day at work tomorrow is just a little bit better.