



CORPORATE HOUSING
PROVIDERS ASSOCIATION

NAVIGATING THE NOISE PODCAST EPISODE 19: CHECKING IN: WHERE IS THE INDUSTRY NOW?

Brian David Johnson:

Hey, everybody and welcome to Navigating the Noise, a broadcast brought to you by CHPA, the Corporate Housing Providers Association. I'm Brian David Johnson. I'm your futurist, and I'm your host for Navigating the Noise. I'm also the engineer in this time of the pandemic. I'm the one behind running the controls of keeping things going as we normally are. So please, if things are a little choppy, I apologize in advance. So welcome to Navigating the Noise where we like to get together and look at where things might be going in the future. We know there's oftentimes a lot of noise, and it's our goal to kind of give you some ways to navigate through it, to think about what you might do and how to really start taking action today to prepare for tomorrow.

Brian David Johnson:

And certainly we find ourselves during this pandemic time quite challenged. And so for season three, we've been taking many different approaches, right? We've been doing our normal kind of big futurist thinking about innovation and how do you innovate during the pandemic. We've even been doing really specific ones sort of down and dirty, right, where we're be just be looking at cleaning. And today, we're going to do something different as well. Typically, we have a couple of guests on, and we kind of talk about a single subject, and we then dive into that, and we think about three things to do. But today on the broadcast we're going to do things a little bit different.

Brian David Johnson:

We only have one guest. We have Peggy Smith. She's the Chief Strategy Officer at CapRelo. She's got a really interesting background so what she's doing now as the chief strategy officer, as well as what she's done in the past. And she's got a great perspective, but she's our only guest because we want to start finding out what's going on? We've been in the pandemic now for several months. Different places are opening up. Some people are getting back to business. Business is getting back in different ways in different places. So we wanted to check in. We wanted to check in with people and see what they're seeing, bring people not only from the industry, but also outside the industry who have different perspectives.

Brian David Johnson:

That's really what we're going to do today is just have a conversation about that. As always, if you have any suggestions or people that you think we should talk to or different areas, you can always send them to me. So we're going to dive in and get started on that. Let's actually bring in Peggy. I'm going to switch over. I'm going to unpin our video and bring Peggy up. So, Peggy, welcome to the show. Thank you so much for coming on.

Peggy Smith:

Hello, Brian. How are you?

Brian David Johnson:

I'm doing awesome. It's a beautiful day here in the Pacific Northwest.

Peggy Smith:

It is. You know what? We need to wrap this rather quickly because it's 74 and sunny here in Seattle and we know how this goes.

Brian David Johnson:

I'm up on the North Coast of Oregon. It's an absolutely beautiful, beautiful day here as well. So what we wanted to do is ... Actually why don't we do this, Peggy? Just to set it up for folks, just maybe give them a little bit about your background. I think you've got an interesting background and also you have a new position at CapRelo. Because we really thought that it's a great ... Your perspective, certainly as chief strategy officer because you are thinking about the future and thinking about strategy, but also you've been kind of had this interesting perspective in your past.

Brian David Johnson:

And what we really wanted to talk about was what you're seeing now and what clients are saying, what customers are saying, what's the atmosphere out there, kind of what's going on. But why don't we start with you kind of give us a little info about your background?

Peggy Smith:

Yeah. I'd be happy to do that, Brian. I think before I jump all the way into that, I love the title of this Navigating the Noise. And we've been talking so much the last several weeks around wearing masks. I sometimes feel like we're missing the biggest piece in it in the Navigating the Noise, it's the earplugs, right? So we should have an additional element to our mask that include the earplugs so that we can settle our minds to get away from the noise to listen to what's truly happening. So, if this gig doesn't work out for either of us, let's go into that, because I think there's a little startup pop up business for us.

Peggy Smith:

But anyway, a little bit about myself. From a mobility lens, I've been in the industry 20 years and I've had the privilege of having a variety of lenses, I managed Microsoft's Global Mobility program for a number of years, for about 10 years and then was asked to join and lead the trade association. So I led that for just shy of 10 years and now have been on a journey with CapRelo for not even yet 10 weeks. So, I've had the privilege of seeing what it's like from the client side, understanding the demands that clients are looking for and needing. I've done it from the trade association side, which gives you a great perspective of understanding ecosystem players to cross this landscape of mobility. And there are different challenges depending on what's occurring.

Peggy Smith:

And at the time I joined them was right after the recession. So there was a lot of, remember the jobless recovery, the real estate environment. And now hearing out at this organization, which is 38-years-old, the CapRelo side is 22, but the enterprise is 38-years-old. And joining them at a time equally of crisis in this global pandemic. So, it's

always about transferable skills and picking and seeing what you can learn along the way.

Brian David Johnson:

That's certainly a great background for sure. And so that's one of the things we want to do is, as I said, at the top of the show, we wanted to check in with folks and in this time of pandemic and we're pretty deep in, right? Depending upon where you live, we've all been at this for a couple of months now. So one of the ... To check in with you and kind of see, when it comes to clients and customers and the atmosphere, what types of things are you seeing? And also as you're seeing them, with your experience, but also as chief strategy officer sort of thinking about the future, how are you interpreting it? What do you think it means?

Peggy Smith:

I feel like, right now when you talk about, "Oh, we're fatigued, we've been in this since March or beginning of March. So, four or five months." I think that we have to remind ourselves this is going to be a marathon and it might be an ultra marathon of a 100 miles rather than a 26.2 mile marathon. So I feel though what we have done, and there's a fine balance between having a lot of anxiety about what this means for the business and personal health, coupled with, then how do you ensure that you don't become so desensitized, since we have such a long way to go with this in the industry and all the variety of sort of elements that are going to pick and play with this.

Peggy Smith:

The other thing I would tell you though, from a corporate environment perspective, Brian, and we're talking largely about the pandemic. But hey, we can't throw a blind eye to the social responsibility that's now being thrust upon in the line flight with sort of the Black Lives Matter movement, diversity, equality, and inclusion. And so, when you sort of sit back and look at this, and then you throw on there the concerns that countries are having around safe borders, and now you've got geopolitical environments that's sort of interwoven here. So be it a U.S. lens or an EU lens or an Australian lens, you just name it. Where they're saying, "We're not going to allow people to come in for fear of this pandemic, or we're going to require health certificates, or you're going to have to self-quarantine when you arrive here."

Peggy Smith:

I think what Chicago just earlier this week said, "Hey, what's going on here?" And so I think from the perspective of all of those, the great news for us, because I'm a silver linings gal, is HR is necessary now more than it's ever been. And we've talked for years about, "Oh, we have to have a seat at the table." Well, let me tell you, we're the freaking guest of honor, we are seated right next to the CEO. And there's not a more enviable person in the organization right now, and enviable both positively and negatively, right? They're trying to wrestle with, how do you return to work safely? What does that look like? What is a blended distributed workforce model look like if we have to think about remote work in a broader way. All those various sort of dynamics that have to come into play.

Peggy Smith:

And so I want to talk about future-proofing in a moment, but you have to step back and put the earplugs in, take the anxiety just a little bit and take a deep breath and breathe. And, there's a great analogy when you're flying, right? Put the oxygen mask on yourself before your children. And I feel like we have to do that. So this is a collective time for HR to put its oxygen mask on, get its earplugs in, survey the horizon and say, "Where can I make my best efforts in change and in transformation, because I'm not going to change what's going to happen geo-politically. I'm not going to change cases and economies opening and closing. How can I be a lighthouse in a stormy water kind of dynamic?" So I think all things start and have to emanate from that lens.

Brian David Johnson:

That's a great perspective. And I have to echo that. Because when I've talked to folks in those sort of the work that I do as a futurist, we're in the face of these massive global issues, whether like you said, whether it be the pandemic, whether it be around economic inclusion, whether it be around geopolitical problems, it can feel so overwhelming. But what I counsel people with is to say, "Well, focus on what you have control over. What do you actually have control over now?" And sometimes you talk to people in extreme crisis and it's physically like, "Okay, what do you physically have control? Are you standing? Are you sitting?" And get sort of center of people, kind of what you were saying. I love that, "Put the oxygen mask on and the earplugs in and center." Center yourself and okay, let's think about it. But you make a great point with HR, right?

Brian David Johnson:

That the platform that HR affords you. And I mean that in a very broad way, like that it gives us the ability to really affect people's lives and affect not only, and by affecting people's lives positively then affects the organization, however the organization is. And then we also know, because nothing is an island unto itself. You're also going to affect other organizations. And especially like CHPA and like other organizations that you know about really well. As an industry, you can then create it. So there's this kind of echo effect. And that's something that I've been telling people a lot, especially now. And like you said, this is a marathon. And so doing that, I think can be really helpful to kind of get through that marathon. It is what you have control over. You don't have to do it all, but realize what you have control over. I love that point of view. That's really good.

Peggy Smith:

Yeah. You know, I would just also add, Brian to your comments, when I think about HR and then mobility. Mobility from an HR perspective is one of the few areas within HR that pans a variety of things from payroll to talent acquisition, to talent retention, to healthcare and benefits, particularly if it's an assignment, taxes. We are one of the elements of HR that has a really broad lens. And I think that gives us, I don't want to say a competitive advantage, but an advantage of being even more valued within an organization. The other elements that I would add here from HR are two muscles that

we really, really have to get, have to get it back in the gym on, one has largely been what we were screened for, which is around empathy, having an empathetic lens.

Peggy Smith:

Well, let me tell you, you can't be empathetic if you're flooded in your ears. You just can't, your body's physiologically, the demands on its system are greater than its capacity. But the second piece of this is that dealing with ambiguity, and a lot of people just aren't sort of comfortable with that, or have a lot of experience in dealing with ambiguity, but we're talking about a highly ambiguous time.

Peggy Smith:

And we've talked about what's going to happen in the business construct, Brian, but let me throw something else there. Let's not forget that we've thrown families into situations where they have to be at home teachers, at home caretakers, either of elders or youth or whatever it is. And so it's an even more important time for us to recognize that and say, "You know, that return to, even if it's coming back into the office." Some people may not be able to do it, because they don't have an infrastructure for their child or whatever it is. So, again, HR at this point in time man, if a company is making investments in its talent and its skills, HR is the place to be.

Brian David Johnson:

So let me ask you this. So what are you seeing when, from that, the notion of that client perspective or people being out there, you mentioned people grappling with distributed workforce. One of the things we've talked about in a previous episode of the show was looking at what that new normal looks like, right? As we begin to normalize, and we come out of this, as we are coming out of this, what are we normalizing to? What does that actually look like? And you said we're having sort of these distributed workforce, because now we've learned that yes, some work can be done remotely, some of it can't be, and we're starting to get an idea of what these organizations might look like, what other things like that are you beginning to see that people are really grappling with?

Peggy Smith:

Now, right now from a pure mobility perspective we're in a bit of a whiplash window, because every time a, let's just take the latest sort of visa things that have come out, from a U.S. lens, right? And not being political at all, but anytime those are imposed upon, even before COVID, there's a whiplash effect that mobility has to address, either because you've got people that were in the pipeline waiting for an adjudication on a visa status. Or now with the current administration coming out and saying, "There will be a suspension of H1 Visas through the end of the calendar year or whatever." So there's this constant sort of immediate thing where they're thrown into a crisis. Oh my gosh, what are we going to do?

Peggy Smith:

Now, when you step back up one level, what a lot of HR executives are grappling with it are really coming around to what is our return to work model philosophy going to be? So, they are quite right now, quite frankly, Brian, that's where they are being consumed. So HR as an overall entity isn't really having the time to think too much about mobility just yet. Because they're thinking about their entire employment base and how they need to think about a return to work model, much like you're hearing, "Our school is going to start up. Our university is going to start up. Our sport's going to start up." Companies are going through that same discussion around how they can return to work. So once that gets seated, then there'll be more attention I think, given to the actual function of mobility within that.

Peggy Smith:

Now what I would assert is while that's being seated, mobility can play a role, because mobility can say, listen, as you're working on your return to work model, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. We can help by identifying talent or come up with a remote commuter work policy or an extended business traveler. I mean, we've got these levers. It's just, we have always assigned them to a fact after you've identified a talent, individual or something. And I'm sitting here going, "You know what? We can be there at the time as they're trying to figure out what's the return to work model. How can we find our base to help inform that or support the business objective that needs to occur with that?"

Brian David Johnson:

That's a great perspective. I think that is what we talk about all the time, certainly as a futurist. You're talking like a futurist, Peggy. That's great, it's good. There's what the current atmosphere is, what they're dealing with now. And you're right that sort of as folks who can help solve, that you can come and say, "Well, we are also thinking about this and thinking about what's that." What's your strategy for them to help those HR folks, those clients, those customers, as they kind of move to the next step?

Brian David Johnson:

And going back to your sort of being everybody being sort of personal and being able to have an impact, how great is it to then actually have communications with another human being and go, "Hey, we're thinking about a little bit past what you're working on right now, and we can kind of help to kind of think through it." What else? One last thing, that was really good. Future-proofing, so you mentioned that, and when you and I have talked and the kind of the lead up is right, you're going to thought about future-proofing. So when you're thinking about future-proofing, putting your strategy officer hat on with your ... What are the things that you're thinking about as we're moving through this pandemic? Who knows where we are in the marathon, but in this marathon, what are some things just right now that you're kind of thinking through?

Peggy Smith:

You know what, it's kind of funny, because I think future-proofing used to have this timeline, and it was always like a really longterm, like what's your short-term strategy, what's your long-term strategy, right? Well, future-proofing today first off has to be driven in agile principles, be it in agile whatever, agile workforces, agile software

development, agile whatever it is. It's just got to be, because what we're going to do today may not be what we're going to do in six weeks from now or in 12 weeks from now. So I would say the table stakes from future-proofing have become much more shortened in terms of just, you have to have a transformative and ecosystem sort of a way of working that allows for iterative approach to whatever it is you're doing. So we're going to start with that.

Peggy Smith:

What I might have said for this would be a different response six months ago than what I think it is today. But right now I would say, no matter which direction it is, it is all going to be anchored around what is the workforce model of the future going to be? And how can we as service support really dive in and help a business achieve its business objectives during this time of uncertainty and fluid workforce models. So how does mobility, be it in housing, be it in the movement of goods, be it in the coordination of benefits, how can they help the broader HR entity achieve what it needs to achieve?

Peggy Smith:

And so, quite frankly, we're sitting here and we're looking from a CapRelo perspective, we're sitting here and we're saying, "Okay, if it becomes a return to traditional," which you have to sort of lay a path, but I don't think anybody is fooled by that, right? It's not going to be, "Here's a path that we go down." If it becomes a protracted remote work environment, then what is it that we need to do for that? Where is our diversification strategy going to be for that?

Peggy Smith:

If it becomes a hybrid, then how do we want to think about those various things? And within that is, do you need to realign your cost structure? And I don't know, sorry I'm saying cutting costs, but you know, so that you can react more rapidly to things. So we're sitting here saying, "Okay, there's been a lot of discussion, Brian around virtual assignments, virtual internships. Well, what does that really mean? And where does this service sector fit in on that?" We've also seen a lot of discussion around, believe it or not actually, there was some research that came out yesterday I think, or a couple of days ago, around since COVID, take a guess, Brian, around the percentage of people that have actually relocated since COVID. As a total population, in the U.S., uh oh, you're muted.

Brian David Johnson:

I would think it would be pretty low. I would say what, 10, 15%?

Peggy Smith:

21, 21%. Now, here's another fun fact, 21%, 66% of that 21, you know where they've relocated? Home, back home, which means that they're going to relocate back living with the family, because they did it under safety. So what does that mean? Look, we saw this after the recession, the millennials returned home, because they didn't have the money.

Peggy Smith:

As soon as they could, they're like, "I'm out." We're going to see the exact same thing, they're going to want to get out. So you sit there and you go, "Okay, well where can mobility play in that? Because, there was a lot of move activity. It may not have been corporate sponsored, but there was a lot of move activity." So then how can you best position when we get to the backside of this and say, "How can I help them? Because they don't want to live with mom and dad, and mom and dad don't want them there." That can happen.

Peggy Smith:

And as borders go to open up our thirst and our desire to cross a border hasn't changed. I mean, we can't travel right now. But everybody's talking about, "I can't wait until 2021 when I can go on my vacation in Greece." Or same thing as saying, "I can't wait until I can go live there because I got temporarily stopped." So, future-proofing to me is about creating a mindset and a culture that allows you to adapt as rapidly as possible to the uncertainty that surrounds us, given a blended workforce model. So, everybody's going to carve out their own path, let's see who wins.

Brian David Johnson:

Well said. I think with that, thank you so much, Peggy. That's really interesting. I think what we'll do is we'll make sure to put the link if we can find the link to some of that study and maybe even some information about agile, I think even just being able to as an organization being able to kind of look and understand agile. We've done some work on previous shows, thinking about scenario planning and long-term planning and resilience planning. But I think we've not brought up agile, I think that's a really good, just a tool for people to have as they're thinking with their teams and kind of thinking about the future. So thank you. Peggy, thank you so much for joining us. We're going to do a new segment though. So Peggy, don't go away. I'm going to wrap up and do Three Things to Do, but then we're going to come back and we're going to do a new segment on Navigating the Noise.

Peggy Smith:

Perfect.

Brian David Johnson:

Okay. So as you know, for Navigating the Noise we always do Three Things to Do. So Three Things to Do is, what are three things that you can start doing today to prepare for the future? And especially in the things that we've talked about, right? What are those things? And so I was thinking in what Peggy was saying, I really like the idea of understanding this is a marathon and because this is a marathon, put your oxygen mask on, put your earplugs in, take a moment and just breathe. This is a time that we are all overwhelmed, and it's a lot. We've talked about that as well.

Brian David Johnson:

And I think that that's a great thing for Navigating the Noise, right? Take a moment. Realize you're going to be here a while that you're not in a sprint and to make sure that you're centered, going back to what I was saying before when I talk to people about how to prepare for these big, big, almost massive events, it's to center yourself and see what you have control over. So to put the mask on, put the earplugs in, pause, think about what you have control over and what you want to do and where you want to go. So that's the first thing, it's mask on, earplugs in.

Brian David Johnson:

The second thing, and again, this is to pull off of what Peggy said is to think about, for your clients and for your customers. As Peggy said, they're now thinking about how to bring people back into the workforce. What does that look like? In my private practice I do a lot of work with architects and people who are really thinking about how they're changing buildings and how they're changing the different buildings that they're going to put together. I got a call last week from one architect who called me, he's like BDJ, elevators, let's talk.

Brian David Johnson:

And so we talked for an hour around what does that mean between now and before we get a vaccine? And what does it mean in the pandemic to have elevators? Because it's going to be a while, just kind of thinking through the nuts and bolts. So understanding what are people dealing with now and then for your customers and your clients, how can you say, "Well, we are going to be mobile. We are going to get back to mobility," much like one of the previous episodes that we did, "we're all going to get back to mobility." So to be able to go to them and have a conversation to say, "Well, we're thinking about it and we might have some solutions as you start to think about this." To really kind of do that thing that we talk about, that's my job as a futurist and what we do here on the show is to say, "Well, this is what's going on. This is the thing that's in front of us right now. But how do we think about the thing after the thing?"

Brian David Johnson:

I think there's a unique moment in time right now, right now in this pandemic, as Peggy said, that you are thinking about the thing that comes after the thing, right? What you do and what we do as an industry is kind of sometimes on the other side of that is everybody's just thinking about the office. So what is the thing that comes after that? I think that's a really, really good way of kind of thinking into it. And then from a future-proofing standpoint, kind of starting to think about, all right, so now how do you want to come back? What does that look like? How do you future-proof, whether it be using agile, taking what Peggy said, using these different tools to kind of think about, all right now as we're starting to come back, how can we take that moment and think a little bit different about where we might be going?

Brian David Johnson:

So those are your Three Things to Do. Mask on, earplugs in. Think about the thing after the thing, and then go talk to people about that and how you might be kind of help pull them through to pull that string through and then think about future-proofing. And

we'll put some links into kind of think about what does that mean and how even as mobility, as we think about mobility, we're not going to not be mobile, right? We're going to be mobile at some point, but we don't exactly know what that means. Instead of start thinking about, "Okay, as you're thinking about the future, how do we define it?" I mean, I think we could do multiple shows on that. That may be done, might be a really good idea.

Brian David Johnson:

But those are your Three Things to Do, mask on, earplugs in, take a moment, center. Think about the thing after the thing and go talk about it and then think about future-proofing as we're going forward. And if you have any questions, please send them my way. So as always, thank you for joining Navigating the Noise. If you have any ideas for shows or any questions, you can always email us. This is especially for this season. That's where we're getting a lot of our ideas and a lot of places to go and have conversations. If you want more information, you can go to chpaonline.org and that's where you can go and get more info. You can always email us at info@chpaonline.org and always follow us on Twitter. We're at [@CHPAonline](https://twitter.com/CHPAonline).

Brian David Johnson:

I want to thank you for joining us, but before we wrap up, especially in these next few episodes, we're going to do things a little bit different. So we always want to remember that it's about people. This is about people, and on the show we like to bring people on and get that on the ground perspective. And so I'm going to bring Peggy up here in gallery view and say, "Peggy, so this is what you ... Thank you again for coming on the show, you've shared some great perspectives with us around sort of clients and customers and what's going on." But now I want to switch over to the personal side if we can for a moment. I'm wondering if you could tell the audience about your new pandemic position, what is your new role that you have?

Peggy Smith:

Yeah. You know, it is funny. We're all being asked to do what is it more with less and to get creative. And so many of us were forced into work remote environments. And I joked loosely that I am the CEO of We Work - Bellevue, Washington. Because my husband who has always run his own company is working from home and he's doing that. And our daughter who's a displaced university student is also now working from home. And let me just say, Brian, they're not always the nicest tenants. I've thought a few times about booting them out because I will get texts as the CEO and as the supervisor of this site, but it is kind of fun. And I will tell you that my commute is 17 steps I think, and I frequently don't see them in the day. But I see their messes in our common kitchen area. So I'll get a text message periodically about a complaint and we'll use that vehicle. It's all good, it's all fun. And by the way, I don't get paid for that job either.

Brian David Johnson:

I think we're all a little bit of our own sort of CEOs of the We Work. But that's great. I love your stories when we were talking right before the show around the different food requests or the different laundry requests or the different, the submitting the complaints

and things like that. That's certainly something that we've all been living through. But so, Peggy, thank you so much again. Thank you for telling us about your new pandemic position, that's great. And thank you so much for coming on the show today, we really appreciate it. All right, everybody. Again, thank you for joining us. If you've got any ideas for shows or questions, please reach out and tell us so that we can make sure to bring you any answers, any information. That's our goal here on Navigating the Noise is ultimately we are in a very noisy time and whatever we can do to help you navigate through this or answer any questions, that's what we're going to do. So thank you very much. We'll be talking to you again soon. Take care.