Transcript: Hiring to Firing Podcast – Episode 2 – Moneyball
(Fiona Jamison, CEO of Spring International)

Tracey	Welcome to Hiring to Firing the Podcast. Today Evan Gibbs and I welcome our guest, Fiona Jamison, CEO of Spring International, a people analytics company that conducts employee surveys, analyzes people data, and provides insights at every stage of the employee lifecycle. Thank you for joining us, Fiona.
Fiona	Thank you. I'm happy to be here.
Tracey	Let's start by first explaining what we mean by people analytics. Fiona, can you please explain how people analytics is used in the workplace?
Fiona	Sure. People analytics is really the practice of collecting and analyzing organizational and people talent data to improve business outcomes. It really helps leaders to align resources so they get the most out of their people. The most common thing that you'll see, companies using people analytics for is making decisions about who they're going to hire when they're going to hire, how are they going to retain and engage their talent.
Tracey	So we have a good example of that in the 2011 film Moneyball. Moneyball is inspired by the true story of Billy Bean, general manager of the Oakland A's baseball team. Constrained by lack of money, Billy built a team of overlooked and undervalued players with a system of statistical analysis known as Sabre Metrics. Against all odds and the expectations of baseball's so-called experts, the A's made it to the playoffs in 2002.
Money Ball Recording	I believe that there's a championship team of 25 people that we could afford because everyone else in baseball undervalues them. Like and island of misfit toys.
Money Ball Recording	What's threatening is their livelihoods, threatening their jobs, threatening the way that they do things. And every time that happened, whether it's the government or a way of doing business or whatever it is, the people who are holding the reins, have their hands on the switch, they go crazy. I mean anybody who's not tearing their team down right now and rebuilding it using your model, they're dinosaurs.
Tracey	So, the use of data analytics in the workplace has been around for a while, but due to advances in technology and accessibility, it seems to have increased exponentially since the 2011 film, or even going back to the 2002 actual incident that happened with the Oakland A's. At the time, though, in Moneyball, people thought that Billy Bean was crazy. This seems to be an important trend now. People have seemed to accepted it more. What are your thoughts about that, Fiona? In your work, do you see that it's becoming more and more commonplace in the industry?

Fiona   Yes, absolutely. We've been doing analysis at Spring for about 30 years. So it's been around for a long time and how organizations use data is certainly progressed since we first started doing surveys and we have those big binders full of data that sort of got dumped on the CEO's table. Very much more accessible now through the software and technology that's available to companies. I think what's different is that people within HR are being expected to use data and leverage data more frequently in their day-to-day jobs, and they use this information to make better decisions. The thing that's interesting about Moneyball is that they had this huge constraint of money, right. How do we spend this money on these players. And in most organizations today, the most expensive resource you have is your employees. It's your workforce. So you better be using everything you can data, analytics, to generate insights on how you're going to leverage and get the best and most out of your people because you do if you're looking at a machine, or some kind of computer system, you want to make sure you get the most out of it. You're spending an awful lot of money on your employees. You should be using these tools to help you make sure you're making the right decisions.

Evan   I'm going to follow up on that point, I mean, you know the one thing, the first thing that sort of jumps—comes to mind more—you mention Moneyball and the use of the statistics in that movie—you know in Moneyball it's the data that they have, the data that they used to perform the modelling and all that. It's relatively easy to collect, right? I mean it's strikes, runs, I mean it's – the data is not only like very clear and easily measurable and quantifiable, but it's also readily available. It's not hard to get the data. I mean everybody knows all of that is publicly available. In terms of the way that your company performs its analytics, it seems like to me one of the hard—of course I don't know this—but the question for you is how hard is it to get good, usable data? That seems to me like that would be the challenge, as opposed to in Moneyball, they've just got this great dataset to work with.

Fiona   Yeah it really varies by organization. Some organizations have got incredible data. They've got more data than they know what to do with. The biggest challenge we see is how clean that data is and the quality of the data. You may have a system that lists every employee you have and what title they have and how long they've worked for you. But you may not have things like gender or age or if you do that may be incomplete, or maybe it's not their current role that's listed, maybe it's their past role. Because this is often data that has to be updated on a very regular basis. So there's often gaps. And that's why a lot of people analytics relies on attitudinal data through employee surveys. Because that's something you can go out and you can collect and you can measure attitudes about different things, whether they think their supervisor is effective, whether they feel treated with dignity and respect, whether they feel like they have opportunity for advancement. So attitudinal data is used most often in HR departments to try and get a sense of what is the employee experience like? How

are they, employees, experiencing everything from onboarding all the way through to exit. So there is a challenge the data's not always clean. Sometimes it's messy. It's not always kept up to date. So you've got to leverage what you can. So we're often helping companies coming from having dirty data. We do this data blueprinting process with them where we help them to understand what data do they have today. What data is missing. What are the gaps. And how can they start, begin to collect data in a more systemic way that gives them the kind of quality data that you need to run the kinds of predictive analytics that you saw in Moneyball, right? He had, like you said, incredible data, thousands of cases. And that's the other piece is the size of your organization has an impact. If you've got 30-50 employees, there's a limit to how much you can use advance predictive analytics. If you've got 10,000, 20,000 employees, suddenly the kinds of statistics and analysis you can do you know expands exponentially. So it does a lot of context about what good data looks like.

Evan   I'm curious. There is a threshold that you consider for a company size to where you think it's really valuable to employ predictive analytics.

Fiona   You know I think any time you get over 250 employees, you've got sufficient data to start looking at and some of the more sophisticated analysis. That said, I think small companies, even if you've got 30 employees, you should taking time out to gather employee feedback through your employee surveys. You should be tasking the time at least once a year to say, hey, what's it like to work here and how can we get better? They're your most valuable resource. You better be talking to them.

Tracey   Fiona, the difference between Moneyball's use of data, which you know as we've said, is really objective and the quantities of data, and attitudinal survey for example, I would think the attitudinal survey data must be fairly subjective. And how do you formulate questions to really get at answers that are of use to companies?

Fiona   So I think there's a couple of things that you need to be thinking about. You always have to make sure the question or the statement that you're having employees respond to is actionable. You know something that if they scored low on this question, we know how to respond to it. Big, vague questions, you know, unhappy at work. You know they're not helpful because when you get a high score or low score what do you do about that? So being very specific about elements of the job, whether it be pay fairness or feedback from my supervisor, or feeling included in meetings. The more specific you can get, the better. Making sure you're covering core elements of the work experience. We tend to think about four categories. Who we are. What are offer. How we operate, and how we lead. So the four components of who we are is like the culture. What is the mission and vision and values of the organization. Am I aligned to those mission and values? What we offer is all the things like training, flexibility, pay,

benefits. How we operate is do I have the tools and resources that I need. Do the policies and practices make sense and enable me to be effective. And then how we lead is, does my manager walk the talk. Does my manager treat me with dignity and respect. Does my leader share clear goals with me. So when you have those four areas, you're really measuring the entire employee experience. So if you're going to go in and do an all employee survey, for example, you want to make sure that you're covering those kinds of measures

Tracey   I would imagine from a legal compliance standpoint a big pitfall with the use of data analytics is getting the information in, seeing where the trends are trending down, and then not doing anything about it. So do you work with companies just sort of formulate action plans and then make sure that there's follow through?

Fiona   Yes we absolutely do. I think one of the things we all say at Spring is there's no such thing as survey fatigue. There's lack of action fatigue. People love to give their opinion. You absolute ask me what I think about working here, but I will get really annoyed if you don't do anything with that feedback. If I tell you x, y, z is broken and then you just walk away and you don't do anything about it, next time you asked me a question, I'm not going to bother telling you because I've just wasted my time and done that before and nothing changed. So there's two things that we do with our clients. One is, when we share the results, we make sure we're really clear about what the top priorities are. Some short term wins, some mid term things you have to focus and the long term goal. And then we help them to prioritize—what are the resources we need to get this done. Who is going to be held accountable? By when? And how are we going to measure when it's been completed? Because if you don't have that accountability, if you don't have that follow through, next time you try and get employee feedback, your response rates are going to go down. People are frustrated. And if they--

Tracey   Or even worse, they're going to use it as evidence in a lawsuit, right? If someone's saying this is a discriminatory environment and then the company doesn't react to that, that's just going to be fodder for their lawsuit down the road.

Evan   I'm curious. Do you ever do your—provide any of your data or perform your analysis under an attorney-client privilege working directly with a law firm?

Tracey   I was just thinking the same thing.

Fiona   We do. We do. In fact, with numerous clients, we have to do the work through the law firm or through the legal department within the organization. It really depends on the kinds of questions being asked and how the data is going to be analyzed. So a lot of our DEI assessments, for example, often go to the legal department because there's a limited number of people that you want to have access to that kind of analysis. And the way in which the data is aggregated and

grouped together is really vitally important. So any time we're doing any kind of diversity, equity and inclusion analysis, it's most frequently done hand in hand with sort of general counsel and legal representatives.

Evan   That was probably a pretty broad question, but in terms of follow through and taking action based on the analytics you provide, do you see a pretty good percentage or I guess, I guess percentage – do most of your clients follow through and act on the data that you give them or do you see sort of a mixed bag?

Fiona   I would say it's about 70-30. 70% do really, really well and I think it's because we do train them on the accountability piece, it's a very important part of it. There's always some clients, however, who either don't like what they've heard and say what, not us. Okay. Might not be pretty, but it's definitely you. We don't make this stuff up. I don't have the time or ingenuity to do that. But sometimes if it's something that's hard to hear, they get sort of stuck, and then we try to help them to get unstuck. Sometimes I think they try to boil the ocean and they try to do too much. I'm a fan just do one thing really well. And then communicate. Tell your employees that you heard them and you did something to make a change. That's going to have so much bigger impact that trying to do 10 different things and failing at four of them.

Tracey   Do companies go in ahead of time with you instead of strategize of, all right if we get this bad answer, this is what we're going to do about it, so that they don't go too broad in the surveys if they can't handle the negative answers that come back.

Fiona   During the design session, we have a very honest conversation about what they should be asking. If you're not willing or ready to make a change about x, let's not even ask about it. Because, and one thing that often comes up with this is pay. Pay is always one of the lowest scoring items on a survey. Companies are typically like, well we're not going to through money at the problem. It's an important question to ask because it's a labor risk. It makes you vulnerable to union organizing if you have pay issues and so understanding and having that information is critical in my mind. But if you are not willing to address issues of pay. If they they're over a certain threshold, then you probably shouldn't be opening up that kind of lens with your employees. So we try to have that conversation ahead of time. Sometimes it's about pay. Sometimes it's about growth opportunities. Sometimes it's about automating investment. Whatever the key is, that organization.

Evan   I'm curious. Do you have any—just like in Moneyball—how it's like a really good example of how data analytics sort of the lead the A's, kind of turned the ship around so to speak. Do you have any of that really good sort of success stories, like Oakland A's type stories where you've had a client that used the

data that you gave them and they sort of righted the ship and really went out and excelled?

Fiona   Yeah I have a couple. We worked for a long time with a large retailer, who shall remain unnamed, and they—when we started working with them, the first year of their engagement score was 40%, which means less than half of their employees really wanted to work there. I mean engagement is really a measure of commitment and satisfaction and discretionary effort. They're willing to go above and beyond for the company. And if you think about it, only 40% of your employees care enough to – they're barely showing up.

Tracey Yeah but in a retail environment, that doesn't really surprise me because people – it tends to be more of a transient workforce. People are going in there and they're not making a whole lot of money. The work is a little boring I would think.

Evan   What does the data tell us, Fiona?

Fiona   Well here's the thing. So you know when they started off at 40% -- three to four years later, they've increased by 20%. So they went from 40% to 60%. By the year five, they were at a 72% engagement.

Tracey What did they do differently?

Fiona   So here's what they did differently. In every single location, they established a people action committee who focused in on the results. So when the got the results back, the manager of the location had an open dialogue with employees and said, okay, wow, we really sucked in these results. What are we going to change? What one thing? So they actually action at the store level. And the employees, they felt heard, they felt like they were empowered and they were included, and I think this was the key, they were included in the solution. So, for example, let's say, one store they felt they hated their break room. They felt it was dirty. One of the microwaves didn't work. It was a miserable place to go and eat lunch. So as a result of their survey, this came up as an issue. And the action planning committee, they said well can we decorate this ourselves? And the store, they purchased another microwave. They painted the location themselves inside. They put up posters that they wanted to see. It became a welcoming and warm environment, and now everybody loves it. Right? So there's a couple of lessons there. One they focused in on one issue. Two, they involved the employees in the action. You know it gave them a sense of pride and ownership. And they felt heard. And so I think with the right system of follow through, you can really see a change.

Evan   The follow up piece of that, is that something that you sort of help with or do you really just of providing the sort of data and the things that they should do, or

is there like another type of consulting firm that comes in and helps implement these things, or how does that process work? Because I can see my clients getting your results and saying do x, y and z and here are the things you need to do and they're like, I don't know what to do. How do I make this change?

Tracey   The lunch room example is a nice, easy concrete example, right? But I'm sure lots of the other answers are a little more amorphous or larger and overwhelming than that.

Fiona   Yeah. It really depends on the issue and it depends on the client and it depends on the resources have in house. So we had spent time with this particular client training their regional HR people to go and establish these grassroots meetings and action planning. So we sort of did a train the trainer in that circumstance. With clients that aren't as big as that, we often run the action planning component for our clients so they can use us as the sort of resource of best practices and ideas and putting things in motion. It really depends on the client and how many resources they have in house versus what they need bring in from the outside. I'll tell you one of the biggest challenges often is large corporate environments where you're dealing with lots of sort of office employees and people are sitting in cubicles and they're not engaging in the same way. I think that becomes much harder and it's become an even bigger challenge for companies now they have remote employees. They're having to get really creative in how we involve employees in taking action because now they're not even coming into the office. How do you maintain that culture of involvement and inclusion when people aren't necessarily face to face?

Tracey   I wanted to ask you about COVID. Have you seen in changes in your work as a result of COVID-19 and the results of so many workforces going remote or at least into a hybrid model?

Fiona   We've been collecting since before COVID, during COVID and I mean we're talking thousands and thousands of survey responses every week. So we know what the employee sentiments have been across industries. And you know you've heard probably a lot about the great resignation and lots of people leaving. I wouldn't term it that. I would call it the great rethink. Because people are actually rethinking how they want to engage with a workplace. Do I really want a career or do I just want a job? Right? Do I want some structure or do I really want all this flexibility? Do I feel as if I really need to go up the pay scale or am I actually happy where I am and can I live the life that I want with this current salary? People are opting out of the workforce and people are completely shifting where they were. I mean, we've seen people shift from heavy corporate environment to education and vice versa. So people are really rethinking. And what we're seeing in terms of what we're measuring changing, employees are much more focused now on flexibility, on health, on benefits, on culture and

teamwork. People are really thinking about what do I get out of this? And am I getting something of value for me, other than a paycheck?

Evan   You know we talked about this on another episode. I don't know if it's going to be in before or after this one airs. You know we have recorded it. I'm curious, have you seen any sort of general trends – generational trends, because that's something I hear at least anecdotally, you know we talk about a lot. We see these, I'm actually a millennial and you I see all these Gen Z'rs coming through and I'm like, man they're so different, you know. Just like the baby boomers were like, these millennials are so lazy and entitled. And now the Gen Z'rs. I don't understand Tik Tok—I don't know—these people speak a different language, so I'm just curious what your take is, any sort of generational splits or anything like that.

Fiona   So as much as I see generational differences, I actually think it's life stage differences that we tend to see. Are they new to a career. Are they new to a position versus have they been in a position or a career or a company for a long time, and where they are in their life stage. Pre kids, with kids, you now, families, generations kids, grandparents, right? I mean I think there's a lot of external influence into what we bring into the work place. Like Gen X's right now are the families generation, right now, dealing with elderly parent and kids, probably launching them to college. We're seeing the younger generational people entering the workforce now, putting a lot more emphasis on things like mission driven organizations and purpose and feeling like they're making a difference and having a value. More so than the previous generation. We're seeing people who are I guess they would be boomers, late X'ers, who are feeling passed over for a lot of the new positions because of the technology component. So a new opportunity opens up within the company and I think oooh, that sounds interesting, I want to apply for that. But they're feeling ignored or that they're not considered because they don't have some of these new skills. So it's almost like an age discrimination issue that they're feeling passed over for positions that they potentially could be very qualified for. So people feeling stuck in their careers, and also people are staying in the workforce longer. So you know you hit 50, potentially you've got 20 more years you may be considering working. I don't want to still be in this same job for another 20 years. I mean I do at Spring, because I'm the CEO, right? Bossing people about for the next 20 years. But I think if you're in a senior leadership role and you're at that age, the fear of trying to move companies and potentially having to start over versus staying where I am and is this where I want to be considering I still have another 20 years that I might be putting in. Job hopping around and going two years here, two years there, it's not that easy to do when you've got a mortgage and kids in college and parents to take care of. So your ability to flex and take advantage of some of these things matters where you are in your life stage. I think almost more so than the generational piece.

Tracey	It used to be that if you had a resume where you jumped around a lot it was looked on as negative and nowadays if you have a resume where you stayed in one place your entire career, that's what's looked on as a negative. Very interesting how perceptions have changed.
Evan	It's also interesting that I just – you know you're talking about that and I'm realizing that sometimes I – I'm 37 and sometimes I'm like, man I'm 37, gosh I'm getting so old. And now I'm like you say that. I've got like 30 years left to work.
Tracey	You've a long way to go Evan.
Evan	Perspective. Yeah I've only got 35 years left to work, you know.
Fiona	Well and I think what employers need to be thinking about and we were part of a people analytics discussion the other evening, we were talking about how companies are stressing out because of the tight talent market. And how few people there are available. And they're ignoring the talent they have within. And I think they need to start thinking outside the box about how do we use the data that we have, understand who we have and leverage that experience and knowledge and maybe redirect it and retrain. Surely it would be easier to retrain somebody who's been with you for 20 years on a new piece of technology and have all that organizational institutional knowledge than it would be teach all the institutional knowledge and experience and the technology.
Tracey	What I see there is when oftentimes you'll see line employees for example, becoming supervisors just by virtue of their seniority and the fact that they've been in that position for such a long time and are an expert as a line person, but they're not given any supervisory training and they've never managed people before and that sometimes can be a real recipe for disaster. So having the right training in place whether your pulling people in from internally into new positions or from the outside, training is so critical.
Fiona	We're actually seeing an increased investment again in leadership development and leadership skills than we've seen. I feel like it dropped off a couple of years ago and we're seeing companies more willing to reinvest in that in the last year or so. think it's because of the talent market.
Tracey	And the need to retain people.
Fiona	If I can't buy it I need to build it and grow it.
Tracey	If it's so hard to buy it you better hold onto what you have, right?
Fiona	Exactly.

Tracey	One last question for you, Fiona, before we let you go. Getting back to Moneyball, one of the things that struck me about the movie was this sort of people component to it. At one point Billy Bean asks –I'm forgetting now the name of the character who he's working with, the economics kid basically, Johan Hill's character, he asks him to go and let a player know that the player has been traded and the character was sort of shocked that he's being asked to do that, and very uncomfortable having a very uncomfortable conversation. What are your thoughts about of sort of making sure that the human element stays in people analytics. And I ask you this because I could just relate my own personal experience. I worked as an outside counsel for a long time in a law firm and then I spent a period of time in HR, in-house actually in a legal department, as a young lawyer I would explain to companies, my clients how to terminate someone, but I never had done the terminating. And then when I went in-house, all of sudden, I had to actually execute on the terminations, and it's a very different feeling when you're the one having to relay the bad news than when you're on the outside giving advice about that. What are thoughts about that?
Fiona	So okay, lots of feelings about this because my PhD is in organizational psychology and I studied the impact of downsizing on survivors. So after you would do the mass layoffs, you know how do employees feel afterwards? So I have a lot of perspective about the psychological impact of if things like firing people – but when it comes to people analytics, I think there's a true skill in communicating insights. Like if I say to you, oh your engagement score's at 50. You need to get to 55. It tells you nothing. If I say of the people in this room, half of them are doing work and working for your and hard, and the other half are sitting there not really—you know they're looking at the flowers outside and the doodling on their pad and they're not paying attention, that brings that data to life and tells a story. And one of the things I'm constantly trying to remind my clients to do is that's not a number. That represents people. That represents perspectives and so story telling is a really critical skill of any people analyst. And it's being able to tell the numbers and explain the numbers in ways that demonstrates experience and personalities and impacts versus just it's an 86.
Tracey	Sure and it's a very important message. I think a good message for us to leave with, so now once again, Fiona, thank you so much for joining us today and for taking the time to give us an education on people analytics and how Moneyball and the Oakland A's made it to the playoffs in 2002.
Fiona	Yeah, you're welcome. I got to spend an extra hour or two looking at Brad Pitt, so that's a big win for me.