Attracting and recruiting talent during a global pandemic
With Claire McNamara

Maddie Duke 00:06
You're listening to *The State Of Work*, the podcast by Lano. *The State Of Work* is about finding your place in the changing world of work as an individual or an organisation. Each episode, we'll dive into some of the benefits and limitations we face when it comes to remote and flexible work. And take a look at how we work, how we hire and manage people, and how we live in this increasingly global workplace.

I'm your host Maddie Duke and in this episode, we're looking at attracting and recruiting global talent during a pandemic with our guest Claire McNamara, Head of Talent Acquisition at ResearchGate.

Headquartered in Berlin, ResearchGate had a strong in-person culture until during the early days of the pandemic, the company acted early to adopt a work from home policy, moving their team of almost 200 employees to a fully remote setup. Claire shared what it's been like to navigate that change, balancing compliance challenges with employee and candidate expectations, the complexities of talent relocations during border closures and lockdowns, as well as what it's been like to lead and oversee talent acquisition processes from her own home. Enjoy the show.

Maddie Duke 01:26
Hi, Claire, and welcome to the podcast.

Claire McNamara 01:34
Hello, Maddie.

Maddie Duke 01:35
In a minute, we'll be chatting about all things recruitment and talent acquisition in a remote setting. But first, could you introduce yourself and tell everyone what you do?

Claire McNamara 01:46
Sure. So I'm Claire McNamara, I am a... Well, at the heart of I'm a recruiter, I've been a recruiter in various types of businesses in various countries around the world since 2001. So at the moment, I'm the head of talent acquisition for ResearchGate. And I've been in that position for a year or so now prior to that, I was also ResearchGate. I've been there for about three and a half years.

Maddie Duke 02:14
For anyone who's not familiar with ResearchGate, what does ResearchGate do?

Claire McNamara 02:18
So ResearchGate is a social network for scientists and researchers. So it's a platform, if you think of it as being, I guess a combination, it feels a little bit like a combination of Facebook and LinkedIn, but specifically for scientists and researchers. It's a place where we've got 19 million users. And it's a place where they can sort of share and collaborate on sort of ongoing projects and research that they're doing, and also where they can ask questions and sort of display their work, I suppose. It exists predominantly to drive open source science and effectively kind of pull down some of the barriers to entry that exist because of the way that publishing works within the scientific world.

Maddie Duke 03:06
Hmm interesting! Do you have a scientific background?

Claire McNamara 03:09
I do not.

Maddie Duke 03:10
Ah, so you're all recruitment, you're a recruitment expert!

Claire McNamara 03:13
Exactly!

Maddie Duke 03:14
So obviously, we're kind of talking about the state of work... As a result of 2020, a lot of companies have moved to a more remote model of hiring and working existing and I wanted to ask you, firstly, how 2020 was for ResearchGate. Initially, as far as I understand it, it wasn't a remote-first company, but you may have had to adapt a little bit to that, due to lock downs and various kinds of responses.

Claire McNamara 03:47
So ResearchGate, we really only kind of in the middle of 2019, we rolled out sort of a remote policy. We've always really prided ourselves on having a sort of a present culture, a lot of the sort of employee value proposition benefits were associated with office working. So we had free lunch every day, and lots of parties and those sorts of things. And it was the view of the executive management team that worked best for us as a business. So we rolled out a remote policy that was effectively that you could work from home for two days a month with prior sort of consent of your manager. Obviously, then COVID arrived. We were quite lucky in that, so we have three co-founders, and one of them is a computer scientist, but two of them are virologists, so we kind of saw what was happening. We were able to prepare to a degree as best as anybody was able to and we shut down the office entirely in the middle of March. So we've been almost 100% remote for almost a year.

Maddie Duke 04:54
Wow

Claire McNamara 04:56
Yeah, that was, I think it was tricky. I think culturally there was some sort of sensitivities around that.

I think that in some businesses, it wasn't particular to ResearchGate, there's a lot of businesses who sort of feel bad performance can be affected by a remote... remote workforce. And so really, we were kind of focused on setting up our people as best we could to give them the right sort of remote experience. So there was a lot of opportunity to come to the office and collect what you needed. If it was a bigger screen if it was a keyboard or mouse or whatever it might be. So that's basically kind of how our remote journey started. We've been through various guises since then, I think probably, since the first kind of couple of months, we're really settled into it, it was fine. We have had to take steps to ensure that we have adjusted a lot of our cadence of communication and and type of communication to different types of people within the business to support different needs that they have.

Maddie Duke 05:58
Could you expand a little bit on that? What sort of communication tools are you using, and how has that really changed?

Claire McNamara 06:05
So previously, we'd always had an all-hands meeting, typically, it was done generally when something big happened, but it was kind of a quarterly thing. We also have an internal messaging system, we use Slack. And, obviously, email is pretty key. We always had a strong meeting culture, we have one on ones, or managers have one on ones, one, a very, very regular basis with their people, we have quarterly development talks, we have a lot of opportunity to be face to face with people, whether it be your peers, or your manager, and also the executive management team. In addition to all of those things, we have regular Q&A sessions with Ijad, who's our CEO. So we sort of strive to be kind of transparent. And since then, we now and sort of from relatively early, we have all hands meetings once a week. So that's half an hour, everyone jumps on the same call, we have a fairly set agenda from the executive management team about relevance of updates. And then we also hear from other parts of the business, depending on what the sort of focus is of the week. It's been a lot more Slack, there's been a lot more using things like Google meet to have like a Hangout area. So here's like-

Maddie Duke 07:31
That's something I've heard from a couple of companies, to kind of create that water cooler effect that you don't get by being around like those incidental chats?

Claire McNamara 07:42
Yeah. Because I think it can be really difficult. And especially if you're, I guess in a role or where you have a lot of meetings, so structuring some of that sort of stuff feels awkward to start with, it's a little bit outside the norm. I always loved being in the office, it's my happy place. It's and when we first went

100% remote, I was quite nervous about it. As a fairly sort of typical recruiter, a lot of my influence is my sort of interpersonal, very in your face kind of personality to a certain degree. And so I was worried that I would kind of get lost in the weeds if I wasn't able to just stroll around and tell people what to do.

Maddie Duke 08:28
Good morning! Good morning!

Claire McNamara 08:29
Exactly. Good morning team!

Maddie Duke 08:33
Yeah, absolutely. I think you're probably not alone in that, and maybe that touches on something I wanted to ask you about recruiters in general, and the future of recruitment skills, with this accelerated move to remote, because there's obviously the personal side to coping with remote work. And that changes from being a person that's in the office chatting away, having that real verbal face to face interaction with people, but then how that actually affects your role as a recruiter, basically, what sort of further skills do you think that recruiters have to build when you're dealing with this remote environment?

Claire McNamara 09:12
I think one of the one of the things that that sort of recruiters and hiring managers struggle with a little bit is understanding what recruiters do, aside from, like schedules, interviews, and things like that. And so that has been a case can be a bit of a challenge, I suppose, in terms of making sure that when you're not having regular meetings with these people, or seeing them in the corridor and saying, oh, listen, I saw a fantastic candidate, you'll be really interested in making sure that everyone knows that, like, what it is that you're actually doing. And yeah, I've always had a really strong belief that as a recruiter, you should irrespective of who you work for, the level you're at, where you are working geographically, whatever it might be, that you should touch every open position every single day so that you are always in touch with what's going on. It doesn't mean you need to go through the whole pipeline and, you know, reach out to all the candidates in it. It just means that, you know, if you look at a pipeline, just do something to progress the role, basically. But yeah, I mean, I don't know that there's anything that's really significantly different, the only thing that I would say is probably as a recruiter is, is can be quite challenging, especially if you are not as old and wisened a recruiter as I am, is, again, it's sort of a personal thing. I've always felt that when a candidate dedicates their time to a process that you should respond to that in terms of feedback. So when we have candidates who sort of applied and we're sort of declining the application or not progressing the application, you know, if they've emailed, then obviously, we will email them. And we would say that you're not being progressed. But when someone has engaged in a conversation with somebody at the business, then every single time for the most part, particularly if they've had a longer interaction, we offer an opportunity to discuss the feedback. It's fairly unusual in recruitment, people don't like to do it. I don't understand why. But what about but it is quite tricky to give feedback to a candidate face to face. And for 19 years, I have given feedback to candidates over the phone. And now I'm on GoogleMeet and I'm telling them what's wrong

with them, literally to their face. You don't want to end up talking too much like you want to deliver the message. But also, yeah, it's tricky.

Maddie Duke 11:59
That's an interesting thing. Why can't it just be a phone call? Why does it have to be video just because we're remote?

Claire McNamara 12:08
Yeah, I think there's probably two reasons. One, it's a good one, sort of a personal reason I have a personal challenge that I've run with for the last four and a half years to operate entirely off the mobile phone data. So I only have WiFi. So I could be like: yes, I will call you on WhatsApp! But I can't be like, I'll call you on your mobile. And can you call me back? Yeah. So that's one element to it. But I think the bigger picture is, we do everything over GoogleMeet with candidates, and so to then kind of shift it to something else, I think would probably feel a little bit fishy.

Maddie Duke 12:51
Yes. Understandable. So aside from the skills needed to adapt to the processes of recruiting when you yourself are based at home or just not in the office? What's it been like for the business itself when it comes to recruiting from a global pool of candidates now, like, how has that changed?

Claire McNamara 13:13
It's really changed in the last 12 months. I think one of the things that we as a business, or businesses everywhere from what I've sort of discussed with other people, I've really struggled with is, the pandemic caused a fracture in the psychological contract that exists between employer and employee. And it wasn't caused by either of those parties. But a lot of people felt a little bit out of control with the change that occurred very quickly. Subsequent to that, what we have found is that a lot of people have taken it remote and, like taking it to its absolute limit. And so when we're trying to explain to our people that it's, I know it feels okay, because you can pick up your laptop and you can drive to Italy. The reality is, even though we are in the EU, there are differing employment contracts, and there are differing insurances and those things. And so, yes, that's made it really tough because we've had to tell a number of people to come back to Berlin, even when they didn't necessarily want to come back to Berlin, and so that that has been quite difficult. What that subsequently means is when we're searching for new people there's also a lack of clarity around that. So now that people sort of feel psychologically, that the borders are kind of open, it means that when someone comes to me and says, "This is the person, I'm looking forward to run our front end infrastructure team, and it's okay, we would totally take someone from the US" and I'm like, "..No". And that's tricky. It's a difficult message.

Maddie Duke 15:42
So you wouldn't take someone that's based in the US?

Claire McNamara 15:46
No, not at this stage. Not…. not forever. We're very compliant people, we're compliant as a business, we're compliant because of a whole host of reasons. Our CEO is on the *Digitalrat*, which is a digital

council formed by Angela Merkel. It's not a big council, it's only about 12 people on it, and he's one of them. And, you know, so there's a whole host of reasons. Aside from that, that we would be legally compliant. But there are a lot of businesses that aren't. And if the moment it's difficult for us to imagine, how not how can we get them, we know how we can get people here, we always recruited globally, we've always brought people in from overseas, and manage their visa processes for them and brought their families with them and that sort of thing. At the moment, it's tricky, you know, I speak to a candidate in the US, for example, and they would like to move to Berlin, they look like they might be a really good candidate, I need someone to start no later than the first of March. And who knows what's going to happen between now and the first of March, they could be willing to get on a plane, we may be absolutely happy for them to start, but you know, the embassy is closed and we can't get a visa or, you know, they go to get on a plane and the borders are closed, and they can't get in because or they can come but their wife can't come because she's only got a Schengen visa and the intention was for them to have a family reunification phase, or six months after they arrived. Or, this is his whole level of complexity, that means that we would, in our wildest dreams earlier, in 2020, we thought that it would open up a world of these amazing candidates from all over the world. And to some degree, it's done that, but actually, it's also made things very, very tricky to actually get them here, when previously it was, you know, depending on the country, it will take a few months, but they will get here. You know, previously, it was fine for us to you know, we had to overcome some stuff to get people here, if it was, you know, that they were from the US and they expected a lot more money than we would pay and that sort of thing that that sort of a a conversation with the candidate rather than a bigger pace around legislator and all that sort of stuff. And the options that we have, and will continue to explore related to us becoming remote first. And in order for us to remain competitive, basically, it's going to be difficult for businesses to do otherwise. And that's tough. And but you know, also, there's a couple of ways to do that. One is sort of, you know, setting up individual legal entities in countries around the world, which is difficult and expensive, and not scalable for a company of our size. Or importer of record or NGOs, which is actually the path that we have chosen to go down to only because it can be done on a basis, it doesn't have to be done necessarily on a total global basis. It can be scaled up and down as necessary. And we've found that to be a really good option for us when the alternatives were. We had someone who wanted to not be in Berlin who, for very, very good reasons, wanted to return to the US. And that person is a very crucial individual in our one particular area of our business. And that was how we got around that particular issue. At the end of the day, you need to make a decision as to whether you need to keep the people that you have if those people decide that they want to not remain in Berlin. Maybe that is a good place to start talking about employer branding, there's been such an increase in remote hiring and remote work in the past year that I would... hazard, I guess or I would guess that candidates expect at least some kind of remote policy or to be able to go, Oh, I'm going to go home to San Francisco.And I'm going to work from there for a few weeks. How do you see that affecting employer branding and the benefits that candidates seek out when they're trying to decide who they want to apply, where they want to apply and where they want to accept an offer, I think it's really, not levelled the playing field, has given us a completely different playing field overnight. So it used to be, and again, talking particularly about sort of the Berlin tech ecosystem, you know, at one AMG had people or businesses that that offered, you know, not a lot of remote flexibility and that sort of thing, but lots and lots of excitement and PlayStations and relaxing rooms, and, you know, free lunches and lights and stuff. And on the other end, he had businesses that would have a three months of the year and

would have a winter office. So the whole business could, if they chose to go to Brazil for three months, and they had a big office set up there, and you will be accommodated. And it's sort of levelled the playing field again, for everyone, because we can't offer free lunch every day, and they can't offer any sort of this winter. So there's sort of a middle ground that everyone has to kind of meet in, I suppose the expectation really is, what we saw from senior level candidates is now everybody. So prior to 2020, there were always, you know, senior people who would say that it would be their preference to work six months of the year from Toronto, and six months from Berlin or whatever it might be. Very senior person, crucial to the business, whether they be an existing or a potential new employee, what would you do, you would be flexible. So whatever it is that you had to do, you would get that done. And now, you know, we reach out to candidates all the time. And we say, you know, might you be interested and they say things like, are you remote first? So remote first thing, obviously, that is your, you know, that's you that's you your jam is you're all about remote. And then you have to ask questions like, okay, yes, we're on our way to being remote first. Where were you wanting to live? And it's a very unusual, in comparison to 2019, an unusual conversation to be having with someone who's maybe got four to five years experience. And they're based in Edinburgh, but they think they like the idea of living and working in Italy, remotely. You're like, gosh, you know, two years ago, I would have, I mean, clearly, yeah, absolutely laughed. But yeah, I think it's opening the doorway to a really interesting time where people will need to be very creative in terms of their employer branding, their employee value proposition, because even when you look at things that would normally be part of the employee value proposition around things like personal development. So personal development, for a lot of tech companies, these conferences, can I go to these fancy Java conferences? Can I go to this Flint conference? Can I go to the conference? Sure. Absolutely. company will pay for it. Yes, that that's your personal development budget for the year. Now, what do we do? There are no conferences, and even if there are conferences, they're online. And so sure, you can take two days off to sit at your computer at home, where you are already sitting to do your work.

Maddie Duke 23:52
….so it's not a junket anymore.

Claire McNamara 23:56
Exactly. It's like a lack of perks now, like what do we do in a world where the perks used to be just for the senior people, and now there are in fact, no perks? Because the majority of companies are going to be remote anyway. So everyone gets to work in their tracksuit pants, like what are you offering me?

Maddie Duke 24:17
What about flexible work? So flexibility of schedule?

Claire McNamara 24:22
Yeah totally

Maddie Duke 24:24
It sort of sits it sits in the same area as remote work in many ways, because it does often go hand in hand where a remote first workplace might also be one where you're able to adapt whatever other things you've got going on in your life, whether you're caring for someone, you know, you've got some specific hobby. Is that something that ResearchGate is considering or has already established?

Claire McNamara 24:53
So again, it's been established and again, it's been established through a pandemic approach to life. So, effectively what's happened is, and we've always been incredibly flexible. I think for me flexibility is built within a corporate context. Flexibility is always built upon personal relationships and trust. So if you have a personal relationship with someone, there's some great statistics, I can't remember it specifically. But it's like if you have a personal relationship with your boss, and it doesn't have to be a very deep personal relationship, it can be like, what are you doing on the weekend, you're something like 48% more likely to report having flexibility in your workplace. So there's this personal relationship thing. Also one of our core values is to build trust. And we really live by that people are very, very accountable. And people are incredibly responsive and collaborative. So it's one of the only places I've ever worked, where I can literally manage my workload through my inbox. Because if I have a task that requires somebody else to do the next thing, I will send it to them, ask them to do it, and I can delete it, because I know it will be done. So we've got those sorts of things in our favour, I suppose. So we've always been, I guess, fairly flexible around working hours. So mostly, most people are kind of around between, like 11, and four. But how you structure your day and your work aside from that is really kind of up to you. So a lot of the engineers won't start till 12, or one and some of the people in the people team will start at eight. So people sort of manage their own time, throw into that homeschooling, we are having to be as a business. Personally, you know, one on one relationships, in our meetings, and in our corporate expectation, we're having to be super flexible. So often we will hear you can't choose a meeting with someone till 11 o'clock, because they are doing the first two hours of homeschooling there, and then their partner takes over. Or you can have a meeting with someone, but you have to be very mindful that what would take 15 minutes is going to take 25 because they have three year old twins standing beside them who will not stop asking for them to do something. So we've been incredibly lucky that all of our sort of performance indicators have gone up. So we've seen an incredible uplift in terms of performance, not that we weren't performing before we were but we're now performing even better. And I think that that will probably continue. But yeah, it's tricky. And it takes a lot of people being very patient with each other too, especially when you're going through, where we're in a bit of a heavy recruitment phase at the moment. And people need to be adapting to that. But also, I need to adapt, because, you know, I need to be realistic about – yes, I am engaged, and we have a dog, but we don't have children. And so our sort of personal home life has not changed that much in the last four months. But I need to stop myself, when I try to schedule an interview for example, if I know that someone typically works later in the afternoon or evening, and I really want them to meet this candidate. Like, 6pm, that would be a great time for you to meet the candidate. But now I need to think also about, "Is it bathtime? Are they feeding the children?", whereas before, you'd be like, oh, and they're at the office, so I know that they're free.

Maddie Duke 28:43
Yes. So with with increased flexibility for employees, management and other other employees have to increase their own flexibility in terms of how they meet others where they are and where they can

Claire McNamara 29:02
Exactly, and just general levels of understanding and also understanding different people's, you know, we've always been really social as a business, so you know, who has kids and who's just had a baby and you know, all that sort of thing. But now it's just much more obvious that the things that need to be accommodated outside of like, what our corporate goal might be for that particular day.

Maddie Duke 29:33
Yeah. You mentioned this hypothetical candidate who was living in Edinburgh and ideally wants to remote work from Italy. Would that candidate still be considered if they were just wanting to stay where they live currently in, Edinburgh?

Claire McNamara 29:53
No for us, so for us, it will depend on where they're currently living and where they would like to live and at this point, we're taking things on a bit of a case by case basis in terms of, if we had someone who was very high potential, and they wanted to live and work in Portugal, for example, like we need to work out sort of whether that's something we can do. But it's difficult because like, especially during a recruitment process, it's all about attraction, and selection, you need to attract them enough that they want to work for you. But you need to select them properly enough that you can then give them feedback and not have them disastrously disappointed if we're not progressing to an offer. And then if he throws in this also this added technical logistical element and when in the process, do you do that, like you want to you don't want to waste people's time, but also you don't want to get into long involved conversations. And with candidates who are right. So you sort of got to time it correctly. And say, tell me about the Portugal thing? Like, how long do you want to live there? Do you want to work there part of the time some of the time? Would you maintain your residence in Berlin? Would you not like? And those sorts of things are the things that make an Employer of Record or GEOs so much easier. Except the only thing I would say is that when we're talking about people who don't necessarily want to live somewhere else, they want to live anywhere. They want to choose where they want to live and that for us is a bit more tricky, because we're not set up for that yet. We might be in the future, but not at the moment.

Maddie Duke 31:41
Yeah, it's an interesting thing as well, as a freelancer. From my perspective, one of the reasons I have gone down the path of freelancing and self employment is it is flexible. And I have been able to literally travel and work exactly. And not necessarily, I often do tell my clients where I am. Yeah, but like I don't actually always have to. And that has been a benefit. And increasingly, it's less of a benefit and you know, secure employment is becoming more appealing because, yeah, you know, we're in a really unusual...

Claire McNamara 32:19
Traumatising, tumultuous...

Maddie Duke 32:24
Yes, tumultuous time, and it's unprecedented! And, yeah, I think being able to live where you live and apply for a job in your dream company, even if they don't have an established entity in your city or country is an exciting thing. And I guess, I'm curious to see what your, like, ResearchGate's stance is on that?

Claire McNamara 32:48
Yeah. I mean, we've always really focused as much as we can on candidates and wanted to live and work in Berlin because it's much easier, like, it's easier for us to look at a pool of candidates and say, these are the ones who've already said that they're interested. And we do that, or that we can assume that they could potentially be of some interest. And we do that in a range of ways. We look at people who, obviously people who've applied, and we look at people who we can identify through tools that we have, are open to relocation, we look at people who have spent time in Germany previously or in Europe. And we look at people who were educated here, we look at people who are from here. And that increases the chance that people are going to want to or be able to move. I'm really hoping that the world opens up a little bit more. I think that there are huge swathes of the population, in lots of countries in the world, who it never crosses their mind that they could come and live and work in Berlin, because they are not sure how the visa situation would work, they would assume that they would need to learn German. I sort of feel like there should be these great pools and wells of people in different countries that would embrace the idea of working, specifically for ResearchGate, irrespective of where we were based. We're incredibly lucky that we have a real mission, it's very special to everyone who works at ResearchGate. It's not a manufactured mission, everything that we do every single day is working towards opening science and increasing the pace of scientific discovery through open source. So, I think that there are lots and lots of people around the world who would love to work in research gate. I think lots of people don't know who we are, and even if they did know who we are, would assume, incorrectly, that they wouldn't be able to work in Berlin.

Maddie Duke 34:54
And they can!

***The State Of Work* is Brought to you by Lano, providing businesses with all the tools they need to compliantly onboard, manage and pay international employees and contracts. For contractors, Lano provides a free all-in-one tool for you to manage your clients, send invoices and get paid on time, every time find out more at lano.io.**

So ResearchGate introduced a work from home policy in 2019. And then obviously 2020 hit, and you've been dealing with everyone working from home and then case by case with people who, for one reason or another, want or need to move elsewhere and continue to work for ResearchGate. What's your take on how all this pressure to go more global, more remote will affect businesses like ResearchGate when it comes to employee retention?

Claire McNamara 35:58
Yeah. I think it's gonna be a problem, to be honest. I think it's gonna be a problem for a lot of businesses. I think it's a problem, particularly in places like Berlin, London, Sydney, New York, where there tends to be a higher amount of churn of employees. The difficulty is that at the moment, because it's winter, most people are fine to kind of work from home and just work from home. And in the summer of 2020, the European summer of 2020, there were still a lot of restrictions, people still very concerned, people are very cautious. I don't think that that's going to be the case in summer of 2021. In Europe, I think it's going to be quite, quite tricky, because the minute someone wants to book some sort of holiday or take some leave somewhere. And I completely empathise as someone who also is very I love to travel, it's like my most favourite thing. I think that more and more people are going to just want to expand their two week holiday to Greece by another month. Because they can, and work. That's tough.

Maddie Duke 37:23
Yeah, for sure. And I think because some people already can do that in some companies that have been remote first or global first-

Claire McNamara 37:36
And it's tricky, because you don't want to be seen to be too overly officious or punishing your employees, but when you're in an environment, as we are in Berlin, where there tends to be a lot more startups and tech, they tend to not have as much of an idea about what is legislatively applicable to them. And so there are a lot of businesses who are absolutely letting their employees work wherever it is that they want. They've been required to sign a sort of a legal declaration that effectively says that if anything goes wrong, that the business takes no responsibility, basically. And you know, there are some really difficult areas to kind of overcome, it's fine, you can go to Portugal, and you can go on holidays. And you can throw in a couple of days working remotely from there. If something happens to you, if you break your leg, for example, and then you turn up to hospital, your insurance doesn't cover you. And it doesn't cover you because you're not actually on vacation, so you're not covered by your travel insurance, whether you have it or not. You're not covered by any sort of German health insurance. You're effectively working, and so therefore, normally there would be business insurance that would cover that, but because you're not actually working, there's this real difficulty. And it's hard to deliver a message like that to employees, it's hard to tell them, it's hard to say, you know, "we've got fantastic holiday vacation days that are positive. I know that you've got all of these vacation days. I know that last year was a very, very difficult year for everybody. And I know that everyone is going to want to take advantage of this summer. The reality is, legally, we cannot support it." So, I don't know what's gonna happen.

Maddie Duke 39:42
Yeah, and obviously there is a difference between doing an extra couple of weeks on your holiday and moving to a different country, paying tax there and living somewhere else properly.

Claire McNamara 39:57

And that's not even taking into consideration the old school feeling about remote work is like, if you remote working, are you really working? Now I can tell you, from my point of view, that my remote working is intense. I love my job, it's by a very significant margin the best I've ever had. And so I throw myself into it. However, you know, even I would find it tricky, just logistically and operationally, to work at the pace at which I'm normally working from... Finland. I mean, we may, we may have just bought a very nice bus, and we are having it retrofitted with a camping sort of set up, which is, I know, I am very excited. But then I think to myself, ah, this is gonna be great. We can go to Sweden. And I think "for how long?", because I'm not legally allowed to. And also, even if I was able to work remotely from the bus, how do I do that? Again, working at pace, there's a lot of hurdles to overcome for a lot of businesses. And I think that particularly employees who have expectations in terms of what they feel their employer should give them. There are microcosms of the world. And Berlin is one of them that has a very strong tech focus, where there is a level of entitlement. "These are the absolute baseline things you must have, you must offer me 30 days annual leave per year, you must also offer me the opportunity to work from home extensively, you must also offer discounts and, and and", and that is the baseline. And anything other than that would need to be made up in cash or stock. So you're already working from quite a high, competitive environment. And if it's easy, especially if you're a very strong, DevOps engineer, you would find it quite easy to find a relatively well paid job in Berlin. As a recruiter, I would question whether it's the best look, to jump around to different employers based on just purely on their individual benefits, but I appreciate that I'm a bit old school when it comes to that sort of thing.

Maddie Duke 42:37

And I guess, they can often be self-employed in that sector, as well.

Claire McNamara 42:41

Exactly. Freelancing.

Maddie Duke 42:43

It's an interesting thing. So I wanted to ask, have you learnt about dealing with existing employees moving from the office, remote work from home, working from home, and the employer's responsibility? Where do you draw the line in terms of supporting employees who may have a kind of unstable home life, or, you know, they might live in a sharehouse with six other people, or they may not have the space for a desk at home, or...?

Claire McNamara 43:20

Yeah, all of those things, and more. So again, I think it comes back a little bit to that sort of psychological contract, and it's not just us but other other businesses as well, where employees have, for a variety of reasons, felt a little bit betrayed. "They are making me work from home," particularly, obviously, individuals who don't enjoy a remote home office. We found it quite tricky, because we obviously shut the office entirely. And then in order to access the office, whether to work for a day or meet a colleague or anything that has to happen within the relevant Coronavirus regulations, needs to be asked for and approved. So, you used to be able to just drop in and grab a beer on a Friday and now you can't and that that's tricky, but the bigger bits around people's safety and potential mental

health difficulties, working from home was absolutely top of mind. It's been something that's hard to ascertain until it gets to a point where the person reaches out. It's hard for us to know what their particular setup is. There have been individuals that have reached out and said, "this is not possible for me to do", and so we've made accommodations for them within the office environment. So we have bookable rooms effectively and those rooms, there are a couple that are not bookable because we have individuals who need to come to the office. And yeah, so, I know I keep saying the word difficult, it has been difficult, it has been really, really difficult. It's been hard, it's been tricky for, I think everybody you know, you could be the most blessed individual in terms of your overall kind of life and lifestyle. But it's still maybe not enough to allow you to emerge from 2020 completely unscathed. You know, every possible setup and permutation of personal life exists at ResearchGate. And we've done what we can to be as flexible as we can. We've had people who have just flat out said, Berlin, I cannot live and work from home in Berlin. I also can't afford to go to live in a bigger apartment, but I can afford to move to Saxony. Like, okay, great, let's help you move to Saxony. Like if that's what you need to do. And so we can certainly do that within the confines of Germany. But it's a big concern. It's a big concern for our sort of broader people team. And it's something that we're focused on in terms of making sure that we're able to retain touchpoints with our people. We've had to have very serious conversations with the management, any sort of manager, anyone who's sort of managing people within the business to make sure that they are setting up collaborative workspaces as best they can online, that they are keeping contact with their people, not just in terms of that sort of strict, you know, once a week, let's talk about your OKRs, and work in progress. Because it's concerning, it's really-

Maddie Duke 46:55
To make the social connections as well and to check in mentally

Claire McNamara 46:59
Exactly.

Maddie Duke 47:00
One other thing I wanted to ask you about before we do wrap up. Do you have any tips for people for candidates who are going through a recruitment process remotely?

Claire McNamara 47:19
Advice I would give to candidates for remote interviewing is pretty much the advice that I would give to candidates generally. I think it's really important, particularly when you're interviewing, to be as transparent as you can be. And I encourage hiring managers to do the same. If you're nervous, say that you're nervous. Just call it out. There's nothing wrong with being nervous, it happens. Be yourself as much as possible. Ask questions. Don't not ask a question, because you're worried what the answer might be. You're better off getting more information rather than less. Be professional, look professional. Make sure that your microphone and your camera work. That's very important. And if you're not sure if they're working, ask the person "Can you see me? Can you hear me?". Yeah, I guess some basic stuff. I think, in terms of advice, my advice to candidates around the sort of pandemic and remote working, and that sort of thing is probably secondary to what I think is a real need that senior people need to acknowledge and work on somehow, as a worldwide community of leaders and managers. What do we

do with junior people, or individuals with far less experience, who aren't necessarily wired to ask for help? And raise a concern? Or those sorts of things.

Maddie Duke 49:00
You mean, in terms of remote work?

Claire McNamara 49:02
Yeah, it's very difficult.

Maddie Duke 49:04
That's a really good point.

Claire McNamara 49:05
I mean, it's hard. It's hard. I'm used to just talking to people in the corridor, I can't do that. And it took me a while to work out the best way to communicate. And different people do it in different ways. Some people love a Slack message. Some people want me to call them, some people think that WhatsApp is better. So you have to kind of navigate some of that stuff. If you're someone who's had a couple of internships, maybe you've worked in a role for a year, you've been put into a position. So you know what's coming, you've got a calendar that's got a meeting with a team, a meeting with the manager, a meeting with whatever it might be, but then what if you're stuck? And for me the question comes down to, it's fundamentally about inclusion and accessibility, because it's the same way that businesses should, in order to fully, fully support their people and be inclusive and accessible, they should have a structured salary review process. Because businesses where you do not have that, the people that skew the data and get the pay rises are the ones that are willing to ask for it. And what we, businesses, everyone, shouldn't end up with is a cohort of employees at any sort of level, where it's made up of only people who have the nuts to ask the question. I think it's problematic.

Maddie Duke 50:35
Absolute, yes, I would have to agree with you there.

Claire McNamara 50:39
I don't know how we solve it.

Maddie Duke 50:41
Yeah, well, I think structured reviews, sounds great!

Claire McNamara 50:45
And mentoring and bodying programmes a bit more. They've gone out of fashion.

Maddie Duke 50:50
Yeah, and I think, trying to remove some of the shame and embarrassment or fear that people have around asking. Those that are too afraid to ask, we need to encourage them and show them that it's a

business decision, usually, it's not a personal one. It's a business question, and it's a resources question.

Claire McNamara 51:15
Exactly. And also for businesses that are now remote, but previously, were not remote, thinking about things like you know, people who, if you get on to, you know, one of the Atlassian products at Jira or some sort of confluence product, and you click something that's incorrect. And you create a problem, how do you get out of that problem? Because you probably haven't had any sort of training on it, because most places wouldn't give you training on Atlassian, it's supposed to be relatively intuitive. So you've broken something because you don't know how to use it properly. And then your help desk is also remote. And it's not a big enough problem to warrant any sort of immediate assistance. And so then you're stuck with. Now what do I do? Who do I ask? Because I broke something. And I don't want to confess that I don't know how the product works. I feel terribly sorry for anyone in any sort of business who doesn't have access to a safe space to ask any sort of question, whether it be business technology, personal people, organisational, anything,

Maddie Duke 52:37
I would say that as you know, in a remote culture, there has to be really proactive efforts to create environments where people can talk about these things, and can talk about things like, we've got the spectrum of neurodiversity and also the way people process information and learn. Some people really struggled so hard with video and work so much better with writing. Or some people who are having to now deal so much more with asynchronous communication, completely written communication constantly, instead of that passing by "Hello, hey, I'm working on this blah, blah, blah", that it's draining, and it's not playing to their strengths anymore. And I would say that's something that this acceleration of remote work is going to have to really make, businesses are going to have to think a lot more about that.

Claire McNamara 53:39
I totally agree. And also from the HR team, you know, I'm the head of talent acquisition. And yes, I'm part of the people team, but at heart, I'm a recruiter, and I'm a bit of a lone wolf. I'm not really, but it's a big thing for the people team, of which I'm a part but not me specifically, it's a big thing for the people team to have to think about the governance of that. So, how are we managing our managers to ensure that Sebastian, who sort of is more sort of neurodiverse, or lives alone, or whatever. Like, how are we managing our managers to make sure that they are looking after the welfare of that individual? In a way that is both proactive, and frankly, scalable.

Maddie Duke 54:33
That's a really, really important question and something I'd really love to talk more about if we had time. For now, before we wrap up, do you have any final words on *The State Of Work* and ResearchGate's place in the world of remote work?

Claire McNamara 54:48

I think at the end of the day, almost everyone agrees that remote work is definitely the best. There are different things around how you set up your own remote work lifestyle that can have a positive or negative impact. But I think that once we emerge from COVID, people will hopefully be in a position where they are able to set up a remote work lifestyle that suits them, whether that is, where they live, how they live, who they live with, that sort of stuff. And so generally, we are hugely pro remote. We are on the way to being remote first, it's being driven incredibly hard by our executive management team, we're trying to get over as many blockages and as we possibly can to get there as fast as we possibly can, within the legal confines that we operate under. And we will continue to push to be much more remote, wherever we can get sort of assistance, whether it be that we can get legislative changes, or we can develop our own internal policies around employee value positions, or utilise suppliers and policies just to make sure that the remote policy that we have is operational as quickly as possible. We will definitely be doing that. There's no question about that. There will always be some people who do like to spend a bit more time in the office, I think that those numbers are far less now than they used to be – I would have absolutely this time last year said, the idea, the remote policy that we had that was rolled out, I never used it, I had very little interest, despite the fact that I was commuting two hours a day. And now if we were told that we were going back to the office – and we've already said that we are not going back to the office, so we will change how we deal with that, but if we were to go back to the office full time, every single person, we would lose an enormous number of employees in a very short period of time. I would potentially go back post COVID, maybe one, maybe two days a week. But our focus and our energies these days are really much more focused on setting up an environment in which our people can be and can live and work as flexibly as they would like to. And that requires us to be remote first company.

Maddie Duke 57:26

Fantastic. That might be a nice place to leave it for now. I think we've covered a lot of ground. And it's been really wonderful to hear all your insights and thoughts and perspectives, both personally from your own experience as a recruiter, but also from your position from within ResearchGate as well. So, thank you so much for joining me on *The State Of Work*, Claire,

Claire McNamara 57:49

Thank you so much for having me Maddie. I really enjoyed it. It's, in these pandemic times, always nice to talk to someone new, frankly!

Maddie Duke 58:10

The State Of Work is available wherever you listen to podcasts. Find us on Instagram or Twitter by searching for *The State Of Work.* We'd love to hear from you. Join the conversation by using the hashtag *The State Of Work*, and be sure to check out our shownotes at podcast.lano.io for more information on anything we talked about in this episode. Thanks for listening and see you next time on *The State Of Work*.