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In this episode, Taren Grom, Editor-in-Chief of PharmaVOICE magazine meets with Erica Cohen, Senior VP, Operations at Greenphire.

Taren: Erica, welcome to our WoW program.

Erica: Thank you, Taren. It's so exciting to have the opportunity to talk to you today. I really appreciate you taking this time.

Taren: Oh, it's our pleasure. I'm looking forward to digging in. Your 20-year plus career has been focused on technology, employee excellence and customer satisfaction. Before we dig into that, what drew you to the life sciences industry to start with?

Erica: What drew me to the life sciences industry? Well, early in my career I moved into the tech world more as a website designer usability specialist and I moved through a lot of different industries. As I networked in the technology space, I began to listen and understand the varying challenges in the healthcare arena specifically and realized the different areas that were being addressed with some of the newer technologies. I mean we're going back 20 years so there's been a lot since then, but it had really become apparent that technology in healthcare at that point was right on the precipice of having a really big impact on everyday activities in the healthcare world.

So I began to work with companies where data and technology were providing pathways that would help medical professionals save time, focus on patient care and ultimately lead to better outcomes. So early in my career I didn't really have the full appreciation that I have now on how essential that enablement and patient care truly is, but as I stayed in the industry over time I stayed because as a patient, as a caregiver, I've developed an even deeper understanding of how important those situations can be. So that's kind of what brought me here and why I'm still here.

Taren: It's so true what you say. It's like that experience just gives you such a wider lens into what's happening around us and you entered through the life sciences because of an affinity for technology. Talk to me about your love and passion for technology. You touched on it just a second ago, but I know it runs deeper.

Erica: It certainly does. I think about it in terms of what I do even today. When I talk to clients and I realize the impact that technology has in someone's day-to-day role and it ultimately allows them more time to do what they enjoy, it makes it exciting and worthwhile. People don't

become a lawyer because they enjoy stenography and typing up reports. They become a lawyer because they want to help people. People don't become a doctor because they want to work in complicated interfaces in technology. They want to help people.

So where technology can really help individuals perform the roles that they have been groomed to work within and accomplish, that's where technology really becomes important. And when I think about that very specifically to what I experience everyday when I talk to our current clients, when staff at a site get to spend more time with the patient, when they get to see more patients in a day and are able to speed up enrollment because they're not spending time at the end of every visit coordinating payments or asking questions about billing or invoicing, and when they have to do research on particular tasks it ends up being very quick and it doesn't take time away from the patient experience. That's what makes it worthwhile. It means that the technology is doing its job and patients are receiving care quicker and in that setting and ultimately, especially in the clinical trial world, treatments come to market faster.

Taren: It's all such good stuff. Right now, you're overseeing Greenphire's business operations and you're looking at process efficiencies and operational excellence. When you look at the industry as a whole, where do you think there could be improvements in both process and operational excellence? And don't tell me everywhere.

Erica: Well, actually I'll say a little bit of the opposite, Taren. I think the industry has done a tremendous job responding to areas of improved efficiency during the last year as we've seen the COVID treatments and vaccines come through clinical trials and regulatory approval. We all know there was a huge push for any company, not just the companies that were producing the treatments, but also the companies that were supporting the life sciences industry to come together and streamline processes to create those efficiencies.

Clinical trials and the process of bringing those new treatments to market, they're going to forever be changed after this past year. And to enable those activities, we had to have created technologies that truly enable the companies making the treatments and the drugs and not distract from that. So the technology itself that enables those activities are what's really important.

I think what we need to improve on across the board is finding ways to take something that is difficult to learn or could be perceived as hard and making it easy and straightforward and part of the user's journey. If something is difficult to learn, people will want to resort back to the way they've always done things, so progress becomes very difficult. Even if the current way is more complicated, it's what users know how to do.

So introducing something new can become a challenge; and because learning takes time, it's important that they're simplicity in design and the ease of training will help remove those barriers to technology adoption and essentially help the industry continue to evolve.

But I really look at this last year and a half and I really – my hat is off to almost everybody in the industry that had a part in it because I don't know that in any other point in history we would have been able to make the progress we've made as quickly as we had in the past year.

Taren: Erica, it's so funny you say that. I was just having a conversation with some friends and we noted that as well. Had this pandemic hit 5 years ago, 10 years ago, would we have been able to respond as quickly, and the answer was no. So really talking about as devastating as COVID has been, there have been some bright spots and this is one of them in being able to respond in real time to a need. So, it's been amazing, you're right, hats off.

You were also instrumental I understand in creating a brand new training team. Tell me about since change is hard, how did you come about instituting change management, which is really difficult to achieve?

Erica: It is. And it's hard not just internally, but externally as part of the industry. With a training team specifically, we have to start with the fact that understanding that everyone learns differently and handles change differently and that was the most important part of the process for creating this team. Obviously, Greenphire's software solutions what we're trying to do is streamline the site and patient payment process. So to be able to streamline the process we had to ensure that the training process helped encourage sites and sponsors to use the tools so that they can ultimately see the benefit and the technology.

To do that, we needed the product users to have easy access to training in whatever way they learn best and really could highlight their individual learning styles. And to do that we created a holistic process that worked for internal users, as well as new external users and existing users. We had to build out a team that could support training modules across all of our different client types and across all of our different product areas. Like I was saying before, adhering to everybody's individual learning style. So whether people wanted to read something to learn, they wanted to attend a live training session, they want to be in the tool, reading tool tips and seeing a demo and recorded trainings in that in app real contextual engagement part of a training, all of those different avenues for training I think were really important to create that holistic experience.

And through the process, what we've done is we've transitioned from training being somewhat of dispersed responsibility with very little feedback on training outcomes and changed it to being highly focused on those users' specific needs and learning styles. And what we've seen is a quicker benefit for system users and getting people into the product quicker and helping even our internal employees come up to speed quicker with our tools and have the ability to really interact with our functionality.

Taren: That's fantastic, and even more important now as we still straddle this virtual world with back in the office world to be able to have those...

Erica: Absolutely.

Taren: ... capabilities and competencies. You're also focused on employee development as part of this whole change management part of your role. And as the industry moves forward toward a more tech enabled future as what we call it, what are some of the qualities that you think employers will be looking for in new hires? Is it beyond the technical capabilities? What are you going to be looking for?

Erica: Right. That's a great question. We're in a world of hiring people today for jobs that will continue to morph as technology continues to evolve. So the hard skills and the experience, while they're important, they're not as important as the soft skills and proven track record. So I guess two qualities that are essential in new hires as I see it are that tenacity and resilience. I would say tenacity because the world of technology is moving so fast you have to hire people that have a persistent drive to always learn and a strong desire to improve the status quo. And resiliency, because despite your best efforts we all know situations do not always turn out in the positive way you initially expect, but how a person handles an unfavorable outcome and how they move forward, that's really the most important thing.

Taren: Are those the same qualities you look for when you're building out your teams or is that different?

Erica: I think those are baseline qualities. But when I am building out my team, I also am looking to hire people obviously with certain skills based on the team they're joining and the role they're taking on. But because we're part of that clinical trial ecosystem we're always looking for employees that are flexible with their interpersonal communication styles.

I have all the teams that are client facing, so that is really, really important, and I want to make sure that each of my employees are able to truly understand the specific need of all of our clients and how they're involved in the process in the clinical trial process. So whether it's a sponsor, a site, or a patient, they all have those unique needs. Each team member has to be able to quickly respond on their feet keeping the uniqueness of each one of those customer types in the forefront. So it's really that awareness of communication style that goes right along with that tenacity and resilience that I mentioned earlier.

Taren: That's wonderful. Speaking of tenacity and resilience, in the course of your career what are some of the few challenges that you may have encountered, and how did you achieve success in overcoming them?

Erica: I don't know if my challenges are so different from most people's challenges. I would say the challenge that has been most forefront always in my career has been balancing family life and work life, which I'm sure you hear all the time. And what I would say is finding fulfillment in both has been a challenge at different stages in my career because there are times when one has to overshadow the other, and the minute you find some level of balance something will shift and then you have to continue that balancing journey.

Years ago somebody – I don't know who to credit because I don't remember who said it to me, but they said learning that balance is a verb and not a noun, so it's a goal and not an end state,

but that active pursuit it's probably how I have succeeded in achieving it. I speak openly to my teams about what's working and what's not working. I have some more conversations at home, and I have them all the time, and I think open communication and understanding of everyone's situation helps everyone get a little closer to that balance and over time it does help me recognize when balance starts to shift and it needs to be readjusted.

Taren: That's such an important intuitive quality of a leader is to understand where those shifting sands are and then being able to make those adjustments in real time so that you remain in balance and things don't go sliding off one end or the other. So kudos to you. Obviously, you were involved very much in the clinical trial space, what are some of the biggest trends you're currently tracking?

Erica: Well, I'm fascinated by the advancements that have happened over the last few years in touchless and remote healthcare. Whether it's enabled through wearable technology, telemedicine platforms, remote decentralized clinical trial technology, I mean COVID-19 it certainly highlighted the importance of all of that technology. We're seeing more and more clients wanting to utilize tools in support of remote trials, virtual payment modalities, those types of things. So it's going to be really exciting to see how all of the organizations that support healthcare, support clinical trial space, how they all continue to develop in that type of technology and really use this last year of the COVID-19 pandemic as not just for what we've accomplished in the last year, but really is the platform to dive into the next level and the next phase of all of that.

Taren: That's wonderful. I often say, everybody says well the next normal and I want to say why go back to being normal. This is an opportunity to be extraordinary, why go back...

Erica: Indeed.

Taren: Let's grab this chance right now and go for it. You are obviously an inspiring leader for the team and for those you work for and your partners, but who do you look to for inspiration?

Erica: I always find that to be a very difficult question to answer. I always want to have an answer here where I name a successful business professional or a celebrity and give you the reason why they were so influential or inspiring to me. But when I take like just a real honest look of how I find inspiration, it's really in so many people that I meet everyday. Whether it's an employee that achieves something that they've been persevering to achieve, a team member that I've been working alongside with, or my personal life when I see a friend or a family member accomplish something. I just really love learning about other people's goals and understanding what drives them to successfully achieve them, how they overcome adversity and they pick up and they try again. It's those personal journeys and stories that each person undertakes that really inspires me everyday. There are characteristics of each of those people that I relate to and I learn from.

Taren: That's wonderful. I mean is there anything you know now, dial back that way back machine, that you wish you could tell your younger self?

Erica: I would tell my younger self to always volunteer to help others solve problems. You don't have to be an expert to contribute value and raising your hand and letting people know that you're available and a resource not only gets you noticed, but it helps you develop skills along the way that you might not have ever had the opportunity to develop.

Taren: I love that piece of advice. I think that is really invaluable, especially for women who are coming up in their careers. It's an opportunity, as you said, to learn cross-functionally and bump into folks that you may not have normally gotten a chance to connect with.

Erica: Absolutely.

Taren: Great advice. And finally, because this is our WoW podcast program, can you tell me about an accomplishment or something that changed the trajectory of your career?

Erica: Yes. If I had to give you one wow moment I'd have to go back early in my career. Having just come back from maternity leave after giving birth to my first daughter, at that time I was an individual contributor and I was really struggling to figure out how to come to terms with returning to the workforce and how to still be the best new mom I could. I had hit so many roadblocks with returning because I was one of the first people in my very small office at the time to start a family, so figuring out how to arrange schedules for doctors visits, day care issues, general exhaustion and through all of it I had a manager that was fairly young and didn't really understand what I was going through. I realized at that point how important it was to create a working environment that was conducive for employees to balance work with whatever their current life event was.

It was the original reason why when the manager role opened up I applied for it. I wanted to make life better for the employees on my team. I realized to create a dedicated workforce, the company needed to make a commitment to the employees and balance the needs of their personal situation, whether it was to care for a new child, an elderly parent, prepare for a big life event, it didn't matter; we had to figure out how to help other people balance.

And since then I've ultimately built my career while trying to make decisions with that employee in mind, and I found that the more I invest in understanding my employees, the more enjoyable my job is as I get to know them and the more excited they are to contribute and find dedication to the company. And had I never had that experience as an early mom, I don't even know if I would have gone for that first management role way back when. And little by little as that became my real entrance into management and realizing the influence I could have on individuals' lives and also in tandem helping the organization succeed really became such a big and strong force in my career ultimately.

Taren: Erica, I have to tell you that is really quite inspiring and the fact that you leaned into that and understood what it was going to take to change not only your career trajectory, but the career trajectory of so many other women is really quite laudable. So thank you so much for sharing that story. That's quite impressive.

Erica: Thank you.

Taren: And thank you for being part of our WoW podcast program. I really enjoyed speaking with you and I look forward to change management in a way I didn't before. So that's all good. Thank you.

Erica: Taren, thank you so much. This was a lot of fun. I really enjoyed the conversation.

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