

Agency for Change Podcast: Chad Mares, Founder and Executive Director, The Work Lab

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- Website – <https://www.theworklab.us/>

Chad Mares: 0:01

Sometimes you just want to scream at the wall, but you would like the wall to at least acknowledge your presence and in our case, a work-life coach could be that for you.

Announcer: 0:14

Welcome to Agency for Change, a podcast from KidGlov that brings you the stories of changemakers who are actively working to improve our communities. In every episode, we'll meet with people who are making a lasting impact in the places we call home.

Lyn Wineman: 0:37

Hey everyone, this is Lyn Wineman, president of KidGlov. Welcome back to another episode of the Agency for Change podcast. So today's guest is someone who is reshaping the future of workplace culture. Now doesn't that sound cool? Chad Mares, founder and executive director of The Work Lab, leads a nonprofit that is pioneering new approaches to employee benefits. Now that also sounds cool. By placing coaches directly within companies, The Work Lab helps businesses unlock better outcomes through personalized employee support. Their mission: To ensure employees can thrive not just at work but in life as well. Pretty cool stuff, Chad. I can't wait to talk to you today. Welcome to the podcast.

Chad Mares: 1:34

Appreciate you having me. Welcome the opportunity.

Lyn Wineman: 1:37

Absolutely so. I'd love to have you start by telling us a bit more about The Work Lab. First of all. That's such an interesting name. When I first heard it, I couldn't wait to hear what you do and what services you offer.

Chad Mares: 1:54

Yeah, I appreciate that. Well, it's definitely a unique thing, especially in this area. Nothing like what we do exists, so we like to think that we've carved out a nice space for ourselves.

Lyn Wineman: 2:06

That in itself, Chad is such a huge accomplishment. I think the saying is there's no new ideas, but I think you have a really new, fresh and important idea here.

Chad Mares: 2:16

Yeah, well, I appreciate that. So The Work Lab is a nonprofit, but we position ourselves as an employer collaborative. Our work began a few years ago, actually underneath the umbrella of the Omaha Chamber and then at the end of this past year so at the end of 2023, we actually took what used to be called the Grow Program underneath the Chamber's umbrella and spun it out to what is now known as The Work Lab. The employer collaborative piece is that we partner directly with employers in the community and really regardless of their size, and we provide their employees with access to an individual that we call a work-life coach. A work-life coach is made available to their folks to help them with anything that is keeping them from being fully physically, mentally or emotionally present at work, and the coach's job is to help the employee then come up with a plan to address whatever that issue or those issues may be, and we do that through kind of a three-pronged approach. The first one is coaching conversation, so really just getting to know someone, what they want to do and the path forward of really what they want out of life, if I'm going to use the kind of biggest thing that I can there. And then we also do financial counseling, which is kind of thinking of blocking and tackling of your financial life. So budget, spending plans, credit reports, understanding just those things and having a plan for what you're doing with your finances, I like to say I've yet to meet someone who has a goal that doesn't cost money, so certainly financial counseling comes in there. And then the last piece of what we do is called resource navigation. We don't pretend to know everything, of course, so I like to say that our coaches will go three to four inches deep but a mile wide.

And when we get outside of our scope of practice which can happen relatively quickly depending on what we're doing, that's where we're partnering with organizations in the community, individuals in the community, and so that's either nonprofit government benefits certainly will come into play from time to time or individual organizations or entities, or even private practice folks think lawyers, therapists, things of that nature really making those connections for individuals that we're working with, based on people that we've identified through our own kind of networking and, just you know, research and connections that can not only educate them on what they have, that whatever issue is that they have going on, but also maybe are in their business and then kind of help them work through it. So we're really trying to help the folks that are working in the organization that we partner with take control of the other things that they have going on, primarily outside of work or some of that bleeds into work in varying degrees and just provide them with an outlet of who do you go and talk to when you don't know what to do on any given situation. And of course, life is becoming more and more complex with each passing year, so I think those challenges are ever present in our lives.

Lyn Wineman: 5:10

Chad, this feels like such a needed initiative because I, as a business owner, it feels like I've seen so much data on when your team members are distracted by a home issue, it makes it impossible to really free up your mind or your skills to do what you need to do at work. We are total humans and we don't just shut down that one part of our brain when we're at the office and we don't shut down the other part of our brain when we're at home. It all goes together. So you know, I'd love to hear your thoughts on why this work that you're doing at Work Lab is so important, both for businesses and their employees and, like you said, why is it so important right now? Why is life getting so hard?

Chad Mares: 6:06

Yeah I think on that last piece, I think there's just more and more different things that you can do, the availability of options that you have available to you, if you think just from a like 20 years ago, just use one example if you wanted to watch TV, you could either put the bunny ears on top of your TV or you would have a subscription with your local cable company. Well, now you have about 500 different things that you can do Netflix, Disney, Hulu, Youtube TV. I mean all those sorts of things. So there's a lot of different things that are that are vying for your time, your attention and your dollar at the end of the day. So I think that's just true. It's going to become more and more true as the economy continues to grow. With respect to what we're doing and you spoke to a little bit about how we're old people. So one of the ways I like to frame that is if you think about the type of conversations that you have at the water cooler or at the dinner table. At the water cooler, you're typically talking about things that you have going on. You know small talk with the coworkers about, oh, the kids are in baseball, or you know whatever they're doing, and then at the dinner table, you're talking about work. So the two are integrated. They always have been integrated, but we try to separate them by coming up with ideas like work-life balance.

Lyn Wineman: 7:25

Yeah, I think that's a myth. We could probably do a whole hour on work-life balance, but I think it's a myth.

Chad Mares: 7:27

Yeah, yeah. So, given that, you know, I think one of the things that the pandemic revealed to us is what you just stated, that that is and has always been a myth. And you know, the video that we had into each other's lives, you know, seeing into each other's homes during the pandemic, I, you know, I say, for the first six months, I didn't have a call with someone where their kids didn't walk into the room it was total chaos, right?

Lyn Wineman: 8:00

Total chaos, right? Kids pets spouses.

Chad Mares: 8:04

Yep, absolutely, absolutely. So we got to see that works at all. You know, when your kids walk into the room and you're trying to do a work meeting, your reaction is pretty authentic in that moment. For the most part, right. Yeah.

That's ever present, but how do you, as a company, address that? So part of our pitch to organizations that, if you want to be able to really address the other things that have, someone has going on. And part of this is formed by my background, so before I came to this work, I was a human resources director with Coca-Cola.

Lyn Wineman: 8:36

Okay, wow, that's a big brand.

Chad Mares: 8:39

Yeah, absolutely, absolutely but you know the the commonalities across workplaces, I think, are all the same regardless of who you work for. There are different types of relationships that dictate what you talk about with different people in different areas of your life.

When you have a professional relationship with someone, particularly someone who has some degree of a power dynamic over you, there are a litany of things that are affecting your ability to do your job in the case of the workplace that you do not want to talk to those individuals about because of how that relationship is, because it's a professional relationship and also how you want them to view you. So it's just not the proper avenue for that, but nonetheless it's going to affect your ability to be present and productive at work. So the key piece there is how do you introduce someone in that you can have those conversations with, that, you can work through it while respecting and maintaining those other relationships that you have? So, very early on, for us, as we came down this journey, it was okay this has to be someone with a different email address than someone in the organization. Anything else, you could call it whatever you want, but it would be HR by another name.

And a common refrain that you'll hear with HR from an employee standpoint is HR is there to protect the company. Common thing that gets said so whether that's real or perceived, it's there and you can't get around that. So having someone else who doesn't work for the company provides a wall there where you have the space to have the conversation. So that was kind of our first thing. And then the second thing was OK, if it's someone outside of the company, how are we going to connect with folks?

So it has been our position that it is not resources or services per se that we're lacking, it's connection. It's someone to talk to, someone that you can get to know on a professional level in what we're doing, but it's a little bit of a different space. Someone that you can get to know, that you can come to trust, that you know has your best interests in mind. All that our coaches are really interested in is what the employee wants and we're going to try to help them do that, whatever that may be. That creates a space for the conversation. And then we go one step further than that is when we partner directly with an employer. We place a coach on site at their place of business a certain number of days of the week.

The importance of that is there's a door open and a light on in the office, so that invitation is there. They know our phone numbers, our email addresses and again, it's different than the company one. But when we're not speaking with anyone or otherwise doing something that's occupying our time in the office, we'll get up and walk around and go talk to folks, which I know from my experience you know you, if you're not getting out on the floor, there are people who want to talk to you about something, but unless they see you, they're not going to wave you down and have that conversation with you.

Lyn Wineman: 11:44

Yeah, it's intimidating, I imagine right, I mean even as friendly as you are, and the fact that you've set up things the way that you have it's intimidating for any of us, I think, to ask for help. I mean, Chad, I think one of the genius things about what you're doing is the fact that you are separate from the employer, and I think the fact that you are a nonprofit gives that sense of you are giving recommendations based on the best outcome for the people you're talking with, not the best outcome for your company or you

individually, because I think that's one of the downfalls right now of having access to so many choices of things. Like we all can summon up electronic devices or AI devices, but it's gotten to the point where you don't trust the results, because either it is someone who's really good at search engine optimization and they're just trying to sell you something. It's someone malicious who's really good at search engine optimization, or perhaps it's AI and it's just bad made up information anyway, right, and so having that human connection from a nonprofit, from someone who's trained, I think seems like such a really good idea. So kudos to you for coming up with it.

So then I'm really curious, Chad, how did you get into this line of work, like I often like to say. Hey, were you an eight-year-old on the playground saying I want to be a work life balance coach like this is my issue. You know you had a very successful career. You probably could have stayed at Coca Cola, you know, until your retirement, but yet you've chosen to do this. Tell me about that journey.

Chad Mares: 13:44

Yeah, well, it definitely wasn't what I thought about when I was on the playground at eight.

Lyn Wineman: 13:49

I figured that was the answer.

Chad Mares: 13:51

You know, I think my journey to this work is similar to a lot of other people, and I think the beauty of it is there are very few people that I've met that have followed a straight path in their career.

You know, a lot of people talk about the beauty of being a lifelong learner and how that's going to need to be important going forward more and more. You know, part of part of our journey, even in doing this work, is you're constantly learning new things, constantly evolving in what you're doing. So that was a bit of mine. So I actually started my career with the Coca-Cola company, worked in sales, worked in operations. I was always drawn to because I had worked there while I was in college. I was always drawn to how can we do the entry level work part better? With some sort of realization like it's more than just pay. Yeah, there's, there's something else missing here. And initially I kind of globbed on to tuition reimbursement as a tool that companies could use. Being a college student.

So that's another example of a resource that's out there that's very underutilized within organizations. So that interest kind of led me to go when I was working in sales and operations management led me to go back to school. I got a graduate certificate in HR from UNO, which I described as an MBA, without the core courses basically. So I had that experience and then I did some stuff within the community as wanting to move into that human resources world while I was working at Coca-Cola. So I got involved in workforce development and really the frame of that was trying to solve some of our own recruitment things that we were going through at the time.

The connections that I made there led to some work in collective impact with nonprofits and that's where I really started to hear and learn about what manifests itself at work as a performance issue, as an absenteeism problem or a good old-fashioned attitude on any given day is very often the result of something else that's going on in that individual's life. That's just how it's showing up. So as a leader

within our organization and eventually in HR, we're pretty flat-footed on how to help people with those things, depending on where it came to us. I mean, the traditional EAP benefit gets brought up quite often. That's an example of a service that's part of the benefits that an employer provides, but employees aren't very apt to pick up the phone and call that, particularly when they've just poured themselves out to HR and we're sliding a brochure across our desk.

Lyn Wineman: 16:34

I think sometimes there's still even this feeling that, oh, maybe that EAP is going to report back to my employer, right, or, you know, there's still some question about that.

Chad Mares: 16:47

Yep, yep, and, as you mentioned earlier, it takes real courage to admit that you need help, to ask for it and then to follow through on whatever that path of help could be. So that's something that we're always really attuned to in the work that we're doing with folks. But having a 1-800 number to call though there are valuable services on the other end of it, that entry point for employees can be a little bit off-putting. Anyway, as I was getting involved in these different groups, I learned about an organization up in Grand Rapids, Michigan, called The Source. It was actually kind of a journey that was started by an organization up there that was trying to solve this issue, that identified the other stuff that you have going on at work and how it bleeds in. So they started a nonprofit that started this model that we've adopted here locally and we're still connected to The Source and meet with their executive director quite often and kind of share stuff even today. But they started this fee-for-service employers paying for a benefit and having someone to talk to. They call that person a navigator, which was the nomenclature that we initially adopted. We've turned it into a work-life coach because we feel it's a more all-encompassing kind of thing of what we're doing. But that's really where the model started from is having someone who's involved with the organization, has a tie-in to the company. So that's that employer collaborative piece where our employer partners are making up our board of directors. Now there are representatives on there.

There are representatives on there, but the work that we're doing is totally geared towards that individual, whoever our client is and what they want. And the thought process there from all of us coming together is that if the business wants true engagement with their employees and traditional employee engagement is how can I get the employee to give of themselves, their energy towards the goals of the organization? Bit of oversimplification, but I think I'm on target with it. Our position is that if the company wants that, the company should first pour into that individual and their goals, the goals that they have for themselves and their family. So I define that as what do you want. What are the things in life that you're trying to achieve, whether it's working at this company from the day you start until the day you retire, or you're out of here as soon as you can find another opportunity? How can we maximize the value of the time that you're going to have at this company? You have a job here, so this is now a part of the story of your life yeah, some sort of chapter in it, right? How can we maximize the value of that time? Let's put what you want in the life that you're trying to build for yourself at the centerpiece of that by giving you a work-life coach to be your outlet, to start to talk about that, to write it down, to make a plan to achieve whatever those goals may be, get them out of your head and onto a piece of paper and start to do actionable steps. The thought process there is that if you're able to do that, if the organization is able to provide that, they're going to maximize the value of that individual's time and, in turn, that individual, because they're maximizing their time, they're going to maximize what they're giving back to the company.

But it starts with the person, and you got to go beyond the traditional pay and benefits because everyone is providing competitive pay and the traditional benefit. So what else are you doing? And I think, fundamentally, the reason why we work is, yeah, you want to be able to pay the bills and all that stuff. But if you break it down even more fundamental, there's some sort of life that I want to have. Work is a means to that end, but I don't think we spend enough time defining what's the end. And the end is not I want to retire when I'm 62. There's a whole life that you're leading in the middle of that, and that's the part that we're interested in.

Lyn Wineman: 20:57

Yeah, Chad, I also have seen so much research on how employees tend to find their purpose through the work that they do as well, and it strikes me that in recent years, companies of all kinds have poured so much money into recruitment and retention that if you can really focus on getting your employees like, healthy and well taken care of, and understand what they want, in your words, pour yourself into their goals I love that phrase. If you can pour yourself into their goals, then they can pour themselves at an appropriate level into the work with your coaches are not conversations that most managers or directors or business owners are equipped to or are comfortable having right, I think it's hard enough to learn management and learn you know organizational development and employee development that you come into my office and start talking to me about an issue that I am very uncomfortable with, like that's not good for anybody.

Chad Mares: 22:23

Yeah, absolutely, and it's part of those boundaries that we have those professional boundaries. The employee, believe me, the employee feels the same way for the most part, there's always exceptions that prove the rule right.

But if an employee is telling you something that's deeply personal about what they have going on, there's some level of discomfort there and they're probably telling you because they feel like they have to, or to explain or justify something that's going on. Like hey, I'm sorry that you know my work's been late the last few weeks because I've missed a few days. It's just I have this going on at home and I want you to understand that. But I think a lot of organizations have tried to build in policies and benefits to employees where you have the space to take that time and you don't need to tell me all of these things. But sometimes they come across and one of the things that we're offering because we want that manager, just like we want the employee, to be present and productive and focused on the job that they have, because there's enough going on with that that when an employee comes into your office, in some of those moments the manager has the space very quickly to say "I'm really sorry to hear that and that sounds like it's tough." So, validating that person's? Yeah, I think this would be a good conversation for you to have with our work-life coach.

Lyn Wineman: 23:42

Yeah, wow, what a nice transition. That is right, like validated. I hear you, I see you. That's got to be tough. Here's somebody that's really equipped to help you. Yeah, I love that. And having the confidence also in making that internal referral because you're there, you're on site, you're accessible, they've seen you walk the floor. That it's all making a lot of sense to me. So, Chad. I'm curious people who are

listening, who may be interested in embedding one of your work-life coaches into their organizations, like what advice do you have and how do they reach out and connect with you?

Chad Mares: 24:28

Yeah, so the simplest way to find us is to go to our website, the worklab.us. The us part of that is it's usually, but I say us because I love it, it's us together thing, yeah, and there's more information that you can find there. There's also a simple form fill that you can fill out to get directly to me. Would love to schedule a conversation and talk to anyone. Our current partners are also listed on there, so, you can see who those those are. I'll just list them off real quick, if you don't mind.

Lyn Wineman: 25:00

Yeah, go right ahead, because it's really some A-list companies that I think are known in the Omaha community and throughout Nebraska for being, you know, the kind of places that take care of people.

Chad Mares: 25:14

Yeah, absolutely, and they're certainly. I'd say they've put their investment dollars where it can go to do this kind of thing. So Lazier Corporation was our first employer partner, followed a few months thereafter by North Intel Services and Signature Performance. We've been working with those three organizations for over five years. Next was Oxbow Animal Health and QLI. We started with them during 2020. So we're coming up on four years with both of them now, and then our other partners are Airlight Plastics, who we've been working with since early 2022, Children's Nebraska and then another organization called Sun Valley Landscaping that we've been partnered with since early 2022. And Sun Valley is what their title suggests they're a landscaping company, so they're one of our smaller business partners. They have 70-ish employees during the summertime and about 30 during the wintertime. So you know, the delta between them and Children's Nebraska is about 100 fold in the number of employees if we're in the winter. So we've really adopted a model that can work with a company regardless of their size, and an investment that makes sense for those organizations to make based on their size.

Lyn Wineman: 26:31

A very diverse group of companies too from, you know, landscaping to healthcare, to manufacturing, obviously showing the breadth of your capabilities as well. So, Chad, I'd like to dive into a couple of other topics too. First of all, what's on the horizon for The Work Lab? Like you've done so many interesting things, what's next? What are some of the things you're tackling?

Chad Mares: 26:59

Yeah, so a few pieces there. I mean, first and foremost, our goal is to try to grow our footprint of the work-life coach, and resource navigation services would be the full title of that. So we are of the belief, not surprisingly, that every company should offer what we're doing as a part of their benefit. That there's a big hole in that space and we think we fill it pretty well. So that's first and foremost, so spreading that as much as we can.

The next piece of what we're looking to do it's kind of buried in our name. So the reason why it's The Work Lab and those are three separate words, but I'm going to hit on that lab part we really view the work that we're doing. You got to get down to the individual level to provide that relationship, connection and support. You got to meet people where they are, and we mean that both in the mental and emotional sense, but also in the physical space. So we're trying to hit all those different things with how we've constructed the model, different things with how we've constructed the model.

The secondary part of that is there are a number of things that employers, in my opinion, are well positioned to address that are larger than themselves. So think kind of societal, systemic issues kind of get thrown around. But there are ways for employers to address these things based on the resources that are available or not available in the community, and they can carve out a space not only to invest in their employees but also to invest in their community. So a work-life coach is available to all employees of the organization but also, by extension, their family members. So we'll go a generation up, a generation down and across the generation and the thought process there is a very simple one. If someone that you care about has something going on that they're not able to address, that's going to keep you from being fully physically, mentally or emotionally present at work. So we might as well put that on the table for you to talk about.

So we can work directly through the employee on addressing those issues, and sometimes it's just a referral to an organization in the community or someone for them to talk to. Sometimes that individual, whoever they may be, may talk to a coach directly. So we have a number of, you know, maybe your spouse works at this organization, but we're talking to the other person who doesn't work at the organization about something that they have going on, so any number of things at play there. So there's a few pieces that we're working on in this space in particular that we've identified. First is the setting up a way for our employer partners to do an employee assistance fund.

This is something that a lot of organizations, particularly larger ones, have adopted and made a part of their benefit. But really it's a way and there's IRS guidelines that are available for this. It's a way for the organization to give grants of money to employees based on, primarily, disaster relief, but also different economic hardships that people may have based on circumstances that are outside of their control. That's one of the spaces where there's any number of things that people may have an issue with that can be solved with a small amount of money that an employer can give based on the charitable guidelines that are out there. You know, you think someone gets into a car accident, their car wasn't insured fully, so it's not completely covered, maybe as liability only, and they're able to afford to fix the car, but they can't afford the cost of a rental. That could be something that may be on the table for them to apply to receive assistance for. That could keep them showing up at work when otherwise that may not have been an option. They're missing a whole week of work while they're waiting for their car to get fixed, and you can see where that could kind of snowball from there.

Lyn Wineman: 30:47

Chad, I think that's fascinating because a lot of the organizations that you mentioned as your partners are also very charitable givers across the community, and of course we want that to continue. But when you think about it, if you can set up an employee assistance fund and give back, kind of give back to the family in a way, that's a really neat idea.

Chad Mares: 31:16

Yeah, and certainly you know I think this past year was somewhat of an outlier in recent years in the local area, but we had the tornado out in Elkhorn and that hit part of the outskirts of Lincoln and then whatever that hurricane was that came through a couple months later. You know, I've lived in Lincoln and Omaha my entire life. I've never seen anything like that before.

Lyn Wineman: 31:35

Right, it was crazy. Wind and rain yeah. You don't think of hurricanes hitting Nebraska, but it was crazy.

Chad Mares: 31:42

Yeah, but a lot, of, a lot of individuals that we worked with, because in Omaha in particular, there was a significant period where large areas of the community were without power and one of the things that happened to a lot of people in that instance was the food in their fridge spoiled. Could be a small, you know, depending on how frequently you're going to the grocery store.

Lyn Wineman: 32:00

But a lot of people don't have the money to buy groceries twice in a week, right.

Chad Mares: 32:10

Absolutely. And then there's you know there's some education with that, you know, if you're if you're a homeowner and you have homeowners insurance's insurance, of course that kind of spoilage would be covered. There's a deductible that you would have to meet with that. Also, if you're a renter, most renter's insurance policies would cover that. But a lot of people don't have renter's insurance.

So in a lot of these situations there's hey, there's a decision that you could have made, ie getting renter's insurance at one point in time that would have added some layers of protection. We chose not to do that. So maybe there's some funding that we could have come in here to help buy you some groceries, at least for the next week, which could go a long way for you. And then there's the education piece going forward to keep that from happening again. Let's look at some renter's insurance policies.

Here's a couple of different insurers that we've worked with, independent agents that would be happy to talk to you. You want to set up that conversation so you can see where the emergency piece of something that may go on which could have brought someone into our door. We can use that to further their, I'll use financial education as a broad term of that, but to further that kind of piece for them so that the next time, whatever happens, they're better prepared, better covered insured in this case to handle that issue. So that's a big part of what we're doing with folks let's help with the emergency, let's get you what you need to move past it, but then let's start to prepare so that the next time something like that happens, we're better positioned to deal with it.

Lyn Wineman: 33:40

Absolutely, absolutely. That's fantastic. Chad, one other area that I wanted to touch on with you is we have a lot of nonprofit organizations and nonprofit leaders that listen to the podcast. We've had a lot of nonprofit leaders on the podcast and you transferred from being a for-profit to a nonprofit after starting

up with the Omaha Chamber of Commerce. Can you talk through the journey behind that and the process behind that?

Chad Mares: 34:13

Yeah, well, so we've always operated under when we were at the chamber, we actually operated underneath the Chambers Foundation.

Lyn Wineman: 34:18

Oh, got it. So you've always been a nonprofit. Ok, all right.

Chad Mares: 34:22

But if you, if you don't mind, I can talk a little bit about my journey from the for profit sector to the nonprofit sector.

Lyn Wineman: 34:27

Oh yeah.

Chad Mares: 34:28

So yeah, obviously, working with, with Coca-Cola, that's that's being in the for profit side of things, that's being in the for-profit side of things. What we're doing here and what we're aiming to do, is to provide a service that is going to meet the market value test for an employer.

So the easiest way for us to demonstrate that, in my mind, is to here's the market price of what we're trying to do and we put that out there and really with the employers. And part of the nonprofit piece for us is this transparency thing. The basic premise is this is what it costs us to do what I've described.

We're going to pass that cost along to you, employer partner, so that we can operate and that we can meet the goal that we have, which is, whoever the individual is that we're sitting across from, we want to help them do what they want to do, and then we've already explained why that's all the thing. So, with that, with the employer partners, I put out here's the market price for the service. I want you to value it at that level, so I want you to make that financial commitment, but then we become a part of your benefits package and we want you to try to do everything that you can to use it, so that allows the employer to invite us into the space in a real way because they've committed real dollars to this.

They want to get that return. They got some legwork that they need to do to make that happen. They need to put us in front of employees. They need to help us market ourselves. We do data reporting meetings with the employers. They need to attend those meetings and to have other people outside of HR attend those meetings. That can go a long way to integrating us into the culture.

From that point on, we'll initially sign a one-year term contract with the employer. So again, part of that market test that we're trying to pass is have I provided you with a service that is of value, that you want to continue to have the service? So our biggest demonstration of that is one the employers that I

mentioned that have continued to have the service over a long period of time, both actually all three of those, so Lozier, Signature Performance and North Intel Services, we've been doing work with them for over five years, but they've also come up for their most recent contract renewal and all of them have signed for an additional three years.

Lyn Wineman: 36:54

That says a lot right, that says a lot. Because you know you've made it through that five-year time. We've kind of made it through the pandemic and a lot of the things we were maybe dealing with two, three, four years ago. So to continue the service, I think speaks volumes for the work, the value of the work that you're doing.

Chad Mares: 37:29

Yep, absolutely. And of those employers that we've worked with, the past couple of years, I think it's six of eight over the past couple of years, as they've come up for renewal, have not only extended but they've expanded their commitment to what we're doing. They've had more onsite time added to their current agreement, which also, I think, speaks volumes to the work that you know. It's not I'm not going to take credit for it, because it's the work that our coaches do, working with their employees, but it's that, that value that that's being provided. The primary measure of hey is this working our employees, valuing this that we have is how many employees are utilizing it so this year, through the first three quarters because we're in Q4 now, believe it or not um, we're over 800 people that have worked with our coaches across an employee population of about 7,500. And that is a over prior. We're up 36% in total utilization.

Lyn Wineman: 38:23

So I think that also says that you're building trust within the employee base of these organizations as well, that's amazing. The other thing I like to think about with that is if you have worked with 800 people, each of those people has family, friends, coworkers that are also impacted by their well-being or their lack of well-being. That you know it's a cliché, but that ripple effect right that goes outside of each and every one of us have been positively impacted as well, and I think that's a pretty neat way to think about it. Chad, I'm curious, you mentioned you work with large work with small organizations. Once again, for people who are thinking about the service, how small, how small could you be and still be a part of The Work Lab?

Chad Mares: 39:20

From a technical sense, we could go down to a company with one employee.

Lyn Wineman: 39:24

Okay, a solopreneur could call up and go my employer is giving me a hard time. Chad come help me out.

Chad Mares: 39:33

Yeah, I'm having a lot of trouble dealing with the voices in my head and I would sure love someone to talk to about it. So, yeah, I mean, technically we could go down that low. My answer for who is the right kind of company to work with The Work Lab is do you have people that work for you?

Lyn Wineman: 39:50

Okay, all right.

Chad Mares: 39:52

Regardless of who you are. If people work for you, they have a life that they're trying to build for themselves or for their families, and they have other things that are going on, and I think it would be of value to them to have someone who is completely unbiased, who cares about nothing than what it is that they want for them to be able to talk to.

Lyn Wineman: 40:12

Yeah, absolutely, Chad, we also have great listeners from across the country, actually even some outside of the country. How far would you go? You know, if somebody outside of the Omaha area or outside of Nebraska has interest, should they give you a holler?

Chad Mares: 40:30

Yeah, absolutely so from a geographic standpoint, obviously, growing in and around Omaha area, you know, getting down to Lincoln is something that's high on my priority list. I was actually down there yesterday afternoon at an event which was wonderful. So we're looking for those employers in Omaha and surrounding communities. I'll say, as far as international, that would be a tough one. For now, let's talk about national.

So all of our employer partners are based or headquartered out of Omaha currently, However, about half of them have a footprint outside of the Omaha area. One as an example. So Signature Performance is one of our employer partners. As I mentioned, Pre-pandemic they had about 600, 800 employees. It's always a moving target but they were primarily based in office locations in and around the Omaha area. Since the pandemic, that workforce is now 85% to 90% remote. And they have employees that are working in 48 states and we are available to all of those folks. And that work is done primarily via you know we use Microsoft Teams as our primary platform with a phone, but we can interact with people that way. One of our other employer partners are Light Plastics has a number of locations that are outside of the Omaha area in Minneapolis, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Texas and California. Small manufacturing facilities. Most of them have 100 employees or less. The work-life coach is available to all of the individuals that work at all of those locations. Again, it's remote because we're based in Omaha, but all of those individuals working within that organization have access to a work-life coach because they work for Fairy Life Plastics. So we're able to work with folks across the country.

From a resources standpoint, it's been really interesting because if we get into a small community and you know, say, someone needs rental assistance, just as an example, and we call one of the nonprofits that's in the area we introduce ourselves, say that we're from Omaha, Nebraska, tell them a little bit about what they're doing, you'd be surprised that they're just very happy to tell us all about their

organization, the other things that are out there. Hey, have you talked to so-and-so over at X agency? Let me send them an email so that connectivity is out there. And really the fundamental thing that we're doing are those conversations and helping the employees come up with a plan, the resources to come to bear here and there as they need them. But you know there's a lot of great people across the country that are willing to help, and picking up the phone and making those calls can get us a long way pretty quickly.

Lyn Wineman: 43:18

That's fantastic, Chad, I just love the work that you're doing, but I'm going to take a break from this part of the conversation because I want to ask you my favorite question. And this is my favorite question because I get to talk to so many people like you that are doing important and inspiring work, and I think a lot of people like to think about you know who are the people out there that are saying interesting, quotable things, like the Simon Sinek's of the world or the Brene Brown, so I'm looking for a Chad Mares' original quote to inspire our listeners.

Chad Mares: 44:00

Oh goodness, you put me on the spot.

Lyn Wineman: 44:02

You are on the spot.

Chad Mares: 44:04

I'm totally on the spot, oh goodness. So I'll talk about it from the work that we do. But I think one of the things that's a part of our thing is, you know, life can be difficult at any given time. So sometime you just want to scream at the wall, but you would like the wall to at least acknowledge your presence and in our case, a work-life coach could be that for you if needed on any given day.

Lyn Wineman: 44:35

That's amazing. I know you're not advocating for people to scream at your work-life coaches, but they'll be the ones there to acknowledge when you have a screamable situation, so I think that's great. Chad, as we wrap up this great conversation today, my last question is what is the most important thing you would like our listeners to remember about the great work that you're doing at Work Lab?

Chad Mares: 45:03

I think more and more people realize this, if they didn't know it already, and we talked about it a bit earlier. But anyone that's working for your organization has that life that they're trying to build for themselves and their family and you don't have to get all the way into their stuff to be able to respect that, to support that. That manager conversation that we alluded to earlier, where the employee comes in and they're putting some of their life out on the table and the manager saying you know that sounds really tough and I'm very sorry to hear that you're going through that. Would you be open to a conversation with our work-life coach? If you want the employee and this came from a friend of mine,

Casey Putney, this is kind of his thing and I may not get it completely right he said your employees want to feel valued, appreciated, respected and heard.

And that little thing is all the manager needs to do for the employee to feel that way. It doesn't have to be overly complicated, it doesn't have to be scary. You know, there's certainly a point in my career where someone putting that on me, I would have been you know wide-eyed and not known how to deal with it.

But it's about having the proper avenue for the employee to express that to someone who can go a little bit deeper into it, where you can maintain the relationship that you have with your, in this case, your subordinate, because you have a different relationship with them than we would have with them and you want to respect that relationship, just like in any other aspect of your life, their boundaries, their rules, their written, their unwritten policies, whatever they may be.

Respecting those boundaries while validating how someone feels, respecting what they're going through and giving them an avenue for help, while maintaining your proper role in their lives. I think it's something that more people can get there. We'd have workplaces that have a greater sense of I love the word belonging for people and helping them kind of move forward, and I think we'd be surprised pleasantly surprised at what we'll get at the other end of that, which is employees who, because they feel that you really care about them and you're putting people in place that can help them, they're going to care more about the work that they're doing. They're going to find more purpose in the work that they're doing and those organizational results and goals that you're going for. You're going to be more likely to achieve them by investing in your folks. But you have to do it in the right way that respects those boundaries and those relationships.

Lyn Wineman: 47:42

Absolutely. I love it. Chad, I appreciate you teaching us, as leaders, how to pour ourselves into our employees' goals. I love the idea of that. I'm going to say I fully believe, Chad. The world needs more people like you and more organizations like The Work Lab. Thank you so much. Thank you for taking time to talk with us today.

Chad Mares: 48:05

Absolutely Appreciate the invitation and hope to speak more with you soon.

Announcer: 48:11

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