

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You're listening to Work in Progress. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, Editor-in-Chief of WorkingNation. Work in Progress explores the rapidly changing workplace through conversations with innovators, educators and decision makers, people with solutions to today's workforce challenges.

Best Buddies is a nonprofit organization established in 1989 with the goal of ending the social, physical and economic isolation of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, IDD. Joining me to discuss the mission is Anthony Shriver, the founder and CEO. Anthony, thank you so much for being on the Work in Progress podcast.

Anthony Shriver, Best Buddies founder & CEO:

My pleasure, no problem, glad to be here.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

One of the mission pillars that you cite on your site is integrated employment, and that is definitely close to the heart of the people who listen to our podcast. I wanted to understand a little bit about what led you to create this part of the mission?

Anthony Shriver, Best Buddies founder & CEO:

Well, just from my childhood, always having and sort of hustling on the side, some kind of a job, some kind of an entrepreneurial thing and having the enormous satisfaction and feeling of accomplishment and joy from actually being able to do something and earn money myself and be able to determine how I was going to spend my money and not have my parents tell me how I was going to spend money or be at their beck and call based on what they wanted me to do, to actually feel like I was out there hustling, earning money, paying some taxes even at a young age and making it happen and feeling like I was part of a group or a team. I've had a couple other people working with me. I had a variety of different businesses when I was young, and then as I started Best Buddies, because I'm obviously a huge fan of social integration inclusion.

I had a giant network of friends where I was young as well. I started with that concept of the value of social connection, friendship, mentoring, and that we all need a great support system to be able to achieve our goals and then start thinking. One of my great loves and passions and satisfaction I get is from being on a team and getting compensated for what I'm doing, and being able to take care of myself financially. Not to mention as I got older, taking care of my family and my children and my wife. I wanted people with special abilities to have that same opportunity, to feel that same energy that I felt, to feel the same challenge that you get from working in a business and having a job and the opportunity to determine how you're going to spend your money and the opportunities that come with independence and having your own apartment and having a vehicle, paying taxes and feeling like you're fully integrated, you're accomplished, you're successful, you're out there making things happen in the marketplace.

It's been something important to me from my childhood really, when I had little businesses all the way through and I wanted that to become part of the Best Buddies mission. That's what led us to create Best Buddies Jobs.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

There's a pretty stark number on your website, which is 81% of adults, 18 and over, with IDD, do not have a paid job in the community. Helping this group find that employment. What does that mean to them?

Anthony Shriver, Best Buddies founder & CEO:

Well, I think when they get the job, it's huge. I mean, I was just going to an event a couple days ago and I met... I don't know, probably 20 or 25 people from the jobs program there. The joy in their face, the appreciation, and honestly from the parents is just mind boggling and humbling and really rewarding and makes me realize that all my hustle, all my travel, all my hustle for money and support is all worthwhile. When you go to an event and you have so many people there that are gainfully employed, many whose parents come up and said to me, "I never thought my kid would move out of our house, and now he's living on his own in an apartment in New York City paying his own rent, going to Whole Foods and Fresh Market and Trader Joe's and part of a team, I never dreamed it was even possible. It's happening because of Best Buddies Jobs."

I mean, if that doesn't make your heart tip a couple extra beats, I don't know what does. For me, that's the kind of thing that is a home run, and when it's not happening in 81% of the people, that's not an option or it's not a possibility right now. It makes you ask for more, it makes you hustle more, it makes you jump on another flight, it makes you try to create more advertising opportunities, more awareness, more campaigns that make people aware of the fact that there's this population sitting on the sideline that's ready and willing to work, and yeah, they're a little different, unique, but who isn't. Figure out a way to get them into the marketplace and let's get them hired and let's get them participating in the economy that we all love and want to be successful and get them off of SSI and get them off of Medicaid and get them going in the community like everybody else. A huge, vast majority of those people are capable and are waiting to be called into the game.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So they're making their own money, they're able to pay their rent and live alone on their own, give that sense of independence, and they also are paying taxes and part of a community? I was watching some of your videos, I thought this was lovely how they are integrated into the workplace.

Anthony Shriver, Best Buddies founder & CEO:

Yeah, I mean just send to Best Buddies Jobs. The yearly tax is paid from people that are employed through the Best Buddies Jobs program, and we found them jobs, it's just under \$5 million a year. They're earning collectively invested these jobs 25 million a year and they're working countless hours throughout the year. They worked 36,000 weekly hours worked. It's a big number. It's small relative to the overall population, but those numbers are real and those dollars are real and those hours are real and they're real human beings with real faces and real lives and behind those numbers, so it's not just some huge arbitrary number that you see published at the federal level, but it's real and it's fair, and a lot of these people I know myself and have seen them and met their parents, and it's really inspiring. It makes my job incredibly rewarding and filled with enormous amount of purpose.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

What kind of jobs are we talking? Because some of the people are... I believe have autism or may have Asperger's, and then others have a little bit more serious or a little more serious disability?

Anthony Shriver, Best Buddies founder & CEO:

Yeah, I mean, it's hard to say exactly. There's not one specific sector, but we've been really effective in the retail sector, TGX has hired almost 500 people working in the stock room, working on the aisles, working behind the cash registers, working as information desks. We have people working in law firms, a lot of them doing data entry, a lot of them working in mail rooms. We have people working at technology companies in Silicon Valley and LA. We have people working at fast food restaurants for sure. We have people, some working at supermarkets. We have some working at our bakery, Best Buddies x Rosetta Bakery. We have some working in schools, teachers assistants periodically. We've had some people have jobs after school, teachers, after school care activities and counseling activities. Jobs are all over the place, and it really comes down to having our team, our staff doing a lot of early intervention when they're in high school and training and intervening when they're young and trying to train them to get job ready.

And that part of our program's growing enormously, and the people that are training more in high school years before they get out into the workforce and have a better understanding, and internships and training have been very successful in securing competitive jobs, and they get out and have a really effective way of keeping them in those jobs and having continuity in those jobs and having success, so that's been really helpful going forward and that's something that's growing tremendously at Best Buddies.

I think the more that the staff understands the individual and what their needs are and what their interests are, because everybody's more successful when they're following their passion and they have a vocation and they understand what that vocation is and they want to work in that particular segment. They could be an actor, I mean, one of the buddies that was there Thursday night with me in New York at our event, he's going to be a co-star with Woody Harrelson in the movie Champions, it's coming out in 2023. I mean, that's a big job, it's a big opportunity, and it's a big movie. Some of them are movie stars and legit movie stars. It depends, I mean, if that's what they really want to do, we need to try to figure out ways to work through our network or if we don't have the network to try to develop the network to create opportunities for them to be successful.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And so before they're hired, and then after they're hired, participants have an employment consultant that works with them and also works with the employer?

Anthony Shriver, Best Buddies founder & CEO:

Correct. We have, in many cities around the United States, we have early transitional services, ETS, which I'm sure you're familiar with, and that's working really well, and as I mentioned earlier, is proven to be really effective at getting them job ready, job trained, so that when they actually get that job that they love and they want, that they're successful. Our employment consultants work with them on that, and staff does that work in the early transitional services, training services around the country and the cities where we operate.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

One of the things that has come to our attention at WorkingNation, we were at the Disability:IN Conference in Dallas earlier this summer. One of the things that we came across was how someone with a disability is integrated into a workplace. I think there's sometimes language or sometimes thoughts of accommodations that employers and co-workers have to understand. What is your best advice to the employer and the co-worker?

Anthony Shriver, Best Buddies founder & CEO:

Well, I mean, I think you have to have a culture that is open to and willing to accept all people in the workforce and recognize that a company is more successful when there's diversity and acceptance, and there's time and energy put into training and awareness and recognition that companies are more successful and employees are happier and everybody's making more money. When you have that mentality... I think it starts at the top. I mean, I think if the CEO or the founder... If I was not really committed to that or interested in that, I think it trickles down and people feel that energy.

I've been committed to it for a really long time. I mean, it wouldn't be in this space if I wasn't. I think you got to get leadership to buy in. I think you got to get leadership to put some money towards training, and I think you have to have leadership to commit to hiring someone like we did, to work and be in the diversity inclusion and equity space so that somebody's on that and thinking about it all the time and getting input from staff and training staff and hosting seminars and workshops online and in person that address these issues and try to create a workplace that's more sensitive and more aware and has proper use in terms of terminology and is cutting edge in this space.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Do you feel that there has been a shift, that there is more acceptance and more understanding of people with different abilities in today's workforce?

Anthony Shriver, Best Buddies founder & CEO:

Oh yeah. I think for sure. I mean, is it where we all want it to be? No. I mean, nothing is where we want it to be for the most part. Is it fast enough? No, I'm sure there's plenty of people with disabilities that say, "Anthony, you're nuts, you move too slow, and the opportunities for us are lousy." That may be the case in some cases out there, and in those situations, obviously I'm sorry and I'd like to do better, but I think compared to where we were when I started this thing 25, 30 years ago, I think it's night and day. The awareness, the accommodations just in the workplace, from elevators to ramps to bathrooms and everything that came with the Americans with Disability Act has been huge. The technology that exists on computers and keyboards, voice recognition is huge. I mean, it just didn't even exist when I started Best Buddies jobs.

The awareness that when people are showing up to work and they're in a wheelchair and there's accommodations for them or they have an intellectual challenge, people are way less focused in on staring at those people or thinking it's weird that they're there or that we've hired them, especially with people in their twenties now, people that are recently out of college, especially with kids that come in high school and college or interns, sometimes you see some in different parts of the country that may raise their eyebrow a little bit, but for the most part, young people now in many, many states, some states are different or have a completely different sensitivity to having diversity in the workforce and being excited that there's a workforce, it's diverse, and not only being excited, but almost wanting to work somewhere where there's diversity in the workforce and there's a company that they understand their values and they have a purpose of beyond just the bottom line and dollars and cents.

Everybody obviously has to make money, and we at Best Buddies have to be successful financially and we have to make money every year to run our organization and keep our budget alive and we have to raise tens of millions of dollars. Its real work and real business and we have to keep our mind on that and focus, but we can do that and at the same time have a diverse workforce and a workforce that's sensitive and accommodating.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

How does this fit in to your overall mission? You have these volunteers who create opportunities in your missions, one on one friendship, employment, leadership development, and inclusive living. How does this all work together to help the participant?

Anthony Shriver, Best Buddies founder & CEO:

I think we're trying to tackle all the different challenges that most people have in their lives. I think developing a great social network and building confidence and having social skills is critical for any job, for any person that has success in their life, I think. Two, having good training is super important and building confidence and opportunities. Having a good place to rest your head every night is critical for everybody. Clean, safe environment to call home. Everybody wants to feel home, that they have a home. I think having the place where you can go every day and feel like you're part of a team and that you're contributing, that you have purpose and that you're valuable and that you mean something, that you count, that you matter, is critical. I think those are the main sort of tenants in our life. I think if you can sort of chip away at all those and sort of cover those bases for another human being, you're contributing in a meaningful way to their life.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Anthony Shriver, thank you so much for joining the Work in Progress podcast.

Anthony Shriver, Best Buddies founder & CEO:

Thank you for your time.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I've been speaking with Anthony Shriver, founder and CEO of Best Buddies. If you want more information, you can go to bestbuddies.org. Thanks for listening.