



Episode #: 12 **Title: Millennial Series #1: Project Starfish**

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Guest Title: Founder

Date: July 13, 2016

Guest Company: Project Starfish

Debra: Welcome to Human Potential at Work, and I'm your host, Debra Ruh. We're very excited to start a new series today. What I really want to focus on is telling the stories of younger people that are really doing things and are going to change the world in a positive way, for people with disabilities. And I'm interviewing people from the generation of Gen X, and also Millennials in this series. So I will run a series of interviews to talk about what's happening and how these young people, younger than me, are making a difference in the world.

So today I'm starting with a good friend of mine, Subs, who created Project Starfish, and we have been talking several years now and I'm a little bit of a mentor to him, and he's certainly a mentor to me as well.

Welcome to the podcast, Subs.

Subs: Oh, thank you so much, Debra. First of all, I really appreciate that you have me on your call today, and second is, I think you're my mentor and over the last one year, the amount of information and the knowledge that I've gained from you is just amazing. So it's my turn to say thank you.

Debra: Thank you. Well, tell us a little bit about Starfish, and also, I know that many people are going to be curious about you personally and why did you feel compelled to start Project Starfish.

Subs: Sure. So Debra, thank you very much. I'll just take a quick couple of seconds to introduce myself. I go by Subs. I'm based in Boston. I've got a day job as well. I work as a director at one of the top software companies, managing a huge consulting company for North America, so it kind of gives me a lot of business background. And as you know, the industry is changing, right? And so good time and a bad time, but we are definitely in the midst of change.

Project Starfish is kind of my passion, and passion in the sense several years back, I went to a job fair for people with disabilities. They were so smart people, PhDs, MBAs, master's degree holders, and I didn't see them getting jobs. For a person

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like me who's very passionate about employment and disability equally, I thought we could do something different.

There's so much of change happening in the industry. We're talking about internet of things, we're talking about accessible technology, we're talking about self-driving cars, we're talking about robots, for example. Why shouldn't there be innovation in the field of employment for professionals with disabilities?

So that's one of the reasons I founded Project Starfish, which is kind of an internship, or you might say workforce development platform is what we should call it, where people can come in, they can get skills, work experience, and they can get networking opportunities. They'll be able to work with businesses to get that real work experience, and then the result is employable people. So that's the reason we started Project Starfish, Debra. We want to solve the unemployment challenges faced by professionals with disabilities of today.

Debra: Right, and I know that you're looking at this from a global perspective as well, since this is a global issue of truly including people with disabilities in the workforce in a meaningful way.

Subs: Absolutely, Debra.

Debra: Yeah, so Subs, tell us a little bit about -- I know you've won some awards and you've worked with Harvard Business School and really tested out the model. So tell us a little bit more about that and how the model works.

Subs: Sure, Debra. So as you mentioned, it's a global model. Why global? Because we believe that we should be 100 percent inclusive. So we are beyond race, religion, color, perception, disability, et cetera. So people working from anywhere, using the help of modern technology, just like we are using, Skype, emails, et cetera, and being in a virtual world, the world is actually smaller.

Now, with regards to the pilot with Harvard, for example, just want to let you know, for the past three years we have created about 150 employed professionals from different countries, like about 8 countries, and we have worked with about 80 businesses. All of them are modern, all of them are contemporary, and we have worked with two Harvard University business.

So Harvard Innovation Lab, which houses the top-most startups in the country, has a startup called Experfy. So Experfy is all about big data and all that stuff, which is cool technology nowadays, right? Now, they had a phenomenal problem. That is, they wanted to accelerate their progress, that is, they wanted to launch very quickly, but to launch quickly they needed a lot of data. Which means they had to have a lot of contact information, they needed to send a lot of emails out, they had to contact a lot of people.

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So what we did is, we had five professionals who are blind, working from three countries at the same time, and we had a three-month project and we could do it not only on time, but at a very good cost as well. Which means Experfy looked at us like we saved at least a month of their work, and helping them launch quicker, faster and better.

Debra: So that was the project with Harvard. Have you done any other projects like that, with other organizations?

Subs: Absolutely. So a very similar one was with another Harvard startup. We cannot name that, but they had a similar challenge. That is, they were looking for a lot of business researchers who could launch or who could create a market or understand the market to launch a *** (07:02) device. So we had people from different parts of the world, working together on business research. And as I said, Debra, the world is changing, which means all work today is knowledge based. Every company, every Fortune 500 company's work is knowledge based.

So we transform professionals with disabilities to become business researchers who could do a lot of data mining, who could do industry analysis and all that stuff, and we teach all this. It can be learned. It can be learned in a couple of months. We all work together, and the result is that we could do market analysis for a company that needed to get things done not in three months but in one month, by using a global model as well.

So similarly, we have worked with about 78 more companies. So I can just tell you some of the companies were management consultants, and these management consultants just needed more information, more analysis, and we helped them. Some companies were *** (08:05) and they needed a lot of backend support, so we could do it. Some of them were accessible technology companies in Israel, and we could help them as well, and none of these people actually had jobs before. So we have a phenomenal internship process where we can provide anybody with the skills, the experience they need.

And there are other companies that we have worked with, like cloud companies, where people have needed a little bit of business development, lead generation. So as I said, we have repeated the model so many times, that we believe that this can scale beyond just a state or a country, but globally, and it's a great solution for Fortune 500 companies or corporations, to hire professionals with disabilities who are absolutely going to fit what they are trying to do.

Debra: So it's interesting to me when you talk about an internship, because when I talk about disability employment all over the world, one thing that I'm seeing is that there's internship opportunities for people with disabilities, but often those internships, they're not paid and they don't lead anywhere and people don't get jobs from them. I've found often that the community gets very discouraged, because we all need internships when we're starting out in a new field or we're

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just starting out on our journey, but if it doesn't ever lead anywhere, if I do everything you ask me to do, I'm an intern, I show up, I'm engaged, but at the end of the day there's no employment outcome associated with it, it can be very discouraging.

One thing I liked about your model is that's not happening in this case. These people often are being paid and they're applying themselves to real problems and getting really good skills.

For example, I know that you had mentioned that there is a woman that's working for you in Project Starfish, that was learning a lot about HR and she was actually doing a lot of the HR projects for Project Starfish, so that she had real work experience so that she became more marketable, because she was actually building up her resume and she was getting paid, which is appropriate, at the same time. I was wondering if you would mind elaborating on some of that.

Subs: Sure, sure. I think, Debra, you're spot on. I don't blame anybody for any internship they are doing, because to be honest, the industry is moving at a very rapid pace. Companies are kind of cutting down their workforce, not that they want to cut down workforce, but it is the skills that worked five years back don't really work now. So all internships that anybody does have to be very contemporary, and that's where we come in with a very different model, which is we are very aligned towards where the jobs are going. That has been possible because I'm kind of in the midst of that industry change. So we observe, where are the jobs moving? What jobs can be reskilled for professionals with disabilities? And which are the jobs that are being sent outside the company, for example? Can we reskill professionals with disabilities to actually execute those jobs?

On top of that, growing the resume is something so important. So companies are looking for contemporary skills, contemporary work experience, and they want good references, right? So our model is exactly that, which is we bring in anybody with a great attitude, we teach them contemporary skills that people want, then they gather the work experience by working with small businesses all around the United States, on small projects, and they get paid in return as well. So it has to be paid, because if it's not paid there's no sense of responsibility or accomplishment. And because we are working with businesses and working with corporates and learning from corporate companies, it creates a phenomenal business network, which just results in people having more experience to get a foot in the door and be exactly aligned with the jobs that companies need.

Now, talking about the lady that you talk about, well, she wanted to get human resource experience. We told her, why don't you become the HR at Project Starfish and do that role and gain that experience for a couple of months? And she did amazing. The first person who did that human resource work in Australia, now she works as a John Maxwell coach. So look at how people are changing

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themselves, right, and transforming themselves to be equally employed. And that's exactly the goal of Project Starfish, Debra.

Debra: And I think you bring up a good point when you talk about -- first of all, you bring in people with disabilities that have good attitudes and that want to work. Because one thing that I remember, Southwest Airlines motto, was that if a person has a good attitude and they really want to be here, we can teach them anything. And I thought, that is so true. Because there have been often I've had employees that I could see their potential. They had great potential. And yet, they never really -- it's almost like they didn't even believe it themselves. And I've worked with a lot of people that have bad attitudes or they don't like being at work, and that's a whole different set of problems.

But if a person wants to work and they want to be engaged in the workforce and they want to be included, we can teach them the skills that they need, to be relevant in the workforce and to add value in the workforce, and that applies to people with disabilities, too. And of course, people with disabilities are people. Some people with disabilities have good attitudes, some people with disabilities don't, just like the rest of the population.

Subs: Exactly.

Debra: I've been fascinated with your model. Give me an example of something that you could go into, say a corporation, and do. Give us an example of a model. You can use an existing model that you've used, or just give us an example of ways that you could actually help corporations in the United States. I know you all work outside the United States, too, but as you're answering this question, consider this along with it.

In the United States, if you're a federal contractor, you have to comply with Section 503, which says 7 percent of your workforce -- you have a goal of 7 percent of your workforce have to be individuals with disabilities. So we know that there's a need to hire qualified individuals with disabilities in the United States. How could a project like Project Starfish help some of these corporations that are trying to make sure that they're offering programs that work for employees with disabilities?

Subs: Absolutely, Debra. I love this question. So Project Starfish, at a very high level, is very aligned with the needs of corporations. So today's corporations, they want a very creative strategy, they definitely want to look good, they really want to help professionals with disabilities. And Project Starfish comes in with a very creative strategy, which is so industry aligned, so contemporary, that any CEO who's looking to kind of fill that gap of 7 people, they can tell Project Starfish about their needs, and we could design a complete course or a curriculum that is exactly aligned with what they are looking for.

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So let me give you a quick example, just to prove that out. So think of the big corporations of today. Everybody's jobs are becoming knowledge based, right, as I keep talking about knowledge based all the time. Think of companies hiring people. So to hire people, you need recruiters and sources, right?

Now, if you look at the work of sourcing, for example, 80 to 90 percent of the work is knowledge based, again, which means looked at LinkedIn, looking at different information resources. Now, professionals with disabilities can be trained to become sourcers and recruiters. It can be done in three to six months. And we have programs that actually do so.

Second point is researching information. Anybody with any kind of disability, even visual, can actually do it. So to give you a very live example, we had five professionals who were blind, or visually impaired, take this course of recruitment and sourcing, for example, and it's a very demanding profession in these Fortune 500 companies. Now, out of these five, two people got jobs, and both are working for American companies as sourcers. Normally, if we didn't do this, these jobs would have been outsourced by these companies. Now, professionals with disabilities are stepping up, they are doing these kind of jobs and that's how the CEOs of companies can take care of a workforce development strategy, which you are talking about.

Debra: Right, right. So I think one thing that, once again, really interested me about Project Starfish was that you're taking individuals that want to work, have skills, maybe they need to be trained to do the jobs that are available. I mean, you look at the workforce demands right now in the United States, for example, and you can apply this to almost any other country, and many of the people that are looking for jobs or they want to get another job, and I'm talking about people as a whole now, not just individuals with disabilities, a lot of people that are out of jobs or underemployed, do not have the skills to go after the jobs that are available. And so we really need to do a resourcing of many, many people all over the United States and other countries, as well as individuals with disabilities.

I also sometimes get discouraged when I go and look at these programs that are being set up. There was a program I was looking at not that long ago in one of the states in the United States, and they were teaching people with disabilities to be wood workers. Well, I don't know about you but I don't know that many jobs where you can be a wood worker. I know that there are some, but I said, well why aren't you teaching them to be social media content managers or to be quality assurance testers or program managers, or jobs that exist, like the sourcers, the research, the recruiters.

Subs: Exactly.

Debra: The jobs that actually are going to exist. The service jobs. And so, often, I see people with disabilities being trained to do jobs that don't really exist.

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Subs: Exactly.

Debra: And it was a very exciting project that I saw, where they were really focusing on sourcing IT skills in Egypt, and they had just really, really solid employment outcomes come out of that program. So I really think programs like Project Starfish are ways that can really help these employers create programs to fill the jobs that they need to fill, both with people with disabilities and people without disabilities, because these programs can really apply across the board. Don't you think, Subs?

Subs: Absolutely it does. I think, Debra, you are spot on, and I think what you are talking about is completely industry alignment and contemporary needs in the industry. For example, everybody is talking about cloud, just to give an example. There are 5,000 cloud companies, and they are looking for people who can generate leads for them, who can make a couple of calls for them. Or they are looking for people after the cloud is sold, to call the customers and keep them happy. All these skills can be learned. In today's world, where people are launching rockets from water, for example, or driverless cars, I think the cloud companies are doing a marvelous job, and there's a phenomenal need for people like those.

So I think professionals with disabilities can be just reskilled in three to six months. So you're spot on.

Debra: Yeah, and I think it's an opportunity for corporations to work with, say, their corporate foundations, to create programs that will reskill individuals with disabilities. And once again, you can expand that out to include any disenfranchised workforce. If the people are motivated, they have a good attitude, they can be reskilled to do the jobs that many employers are struggling to find candidates to do these jobs.

Subs: Absolutely.

Debra: So it meets your compliance needs, it reduces your risk. You have community engagement, so it helps your social responsibility aspect of these conversations, and you can work with really cool foundations like yours, to meet these growing needs of really tapping into the skilled workforce, including people with disabilities, as the workforce.

Subs: Absolutely, Debra. You are absolutely spot on, and you always are. I think typically what happens, Debra, is that many people actually want to work but they have a little bit of fear inside them because they have been out of the workforce. The good thing about Project Starfish is it's run by professionals with disabilities as well. Which means, I'm the person who kind of doesn't have a disability, and everybody else who runs this organization have different diverse backgrounds,

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different disabilities, different walks of life, different color, different culture, and we are kind of an amazing case study of diversity in action, where we build on peoples' strengths.

The good thing about this is, anybody who walks into Project Starfish doesn't have to fear at all. Why? Because we don't need peoples' skills. We just need people to have a positive attitude and know I T and technology a little bit really good, and the rest we can take care. We can kind of take them through a process which takes off their fear, it's called experiential learning, which is like learning by doing and giving them that confidence, and then we have a complete program that provides them whatever skills they need to grow their experience.

So it's the safest place, it's the most interesting place. It's very challenging as well, but it's just like an office system. Just like any corporate company. So just getting this three to six months experience and growing their resume, kind of gives people that ability to get to another job which they never thought of before. So you're absolutely spot on, Debra.

Debra: So let me ask you a question that I'm going to ask everybody that is part of the series of interviews. You are a Gen X, because you were born in 1979, and then Millennials start in 1980. So you're at the cusp. Often, I hear negative things saying about the generations, especially the Millennials, to be honest, that the Millennials are out of touch with society and they're all into their technology and they are not socially responsible. I have found that not to be the case. I have met so many amazing young leaders, like yourself, that are really very, very determined to make a big, positive difference in the world.

So as one of those young leaders that is actually really trying to make a difference, what are your hopes for your generation and the Millennial generation as well, since you're sitting on the cusp of this?

Subs: Sure. Debra, that's such a great question. I think it can be answered both ways, but I kind of agree with you, and I'll tell you why. I've seen a lot of great Gen X and I'm seeing a lot of great Millennials as well. Which means I'm looking at today's Millennials, some of them of course don't really fit what we are talking about, but they are very conscious. They are very thoughtful. They are always looking between the lines to get what the truth is. They're very passionate about what they do and they're very skilled at what they do. They also love to play. They want to enjoy. And they want flexibility over money, and they want quality work life.

So I think this Millennial generation is a great one, because they will take social impact and business impact together forward, and that's exactly what we need.

Debra: Yeah, I agree. I really believe that they are going to change the world. I'm very proud to be a Baby Boomer and I know that we've done a lot of great things, and

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there's a lot of bad things that have been done, too, but I'm very hopeful about the younger generation, and that's one reason why I wanted to really tap into the series of focusing on some projects that are being created, efforts that are being made all over the world, by Gen X and Millennial leaders, that maybe have not reached the kind of spotlight that I think they need focus on what they're doing. So that's one way I want to use this platform, is to make sure that employers that really want to include people with disabilities and they're looking for the way to really tap into the human potential, can know that there are some really creative, innovative projects out here.

Now speaking of that, tell our users how they can contact you, how they can find out more about what your organization is doing. How do they learn more about your efforts?

Subs: Sure, sure, Debra. So I'll basically start off with our website. So just to let everybody know that my organization's name is Project Starfish, and the Project Starfish name basically comes from that story of the kid throwing starfish back.

Debra: Tell us the story, in case people don't know it. I love that story.

Subs: Okay, sure, sure. The starfish story is about a kid on the seashore, throwing starfish back. There was a person who was kind of walking by, watched the kid and said, "Hey, kid, what are you doing?" And the kid said, "Can't you see, I'm throwing starfish back? If I don't throw them back, they're going to die." So the gentleman looked at the kid and said, "Hey, what? There's millions of starfish all across the seashore. What difference can you make?" So the kid throws back one starfish back in the ocean and says, "Well, it made a difference to that one."

So it was started based on the premise that if people think that unemployment cannot be solved, that's incorrect. And the Project Starfish model is a complete game changer. To us, even one person matters. So three years back, we took a target to help 50 people, 50 professionals who were out of the workforce. Today, we have done about 150. We had a target of just working with 10 companies; we worked with 80. And we generate money from within, against any other organization, so that makes us unique.

But going back, Project Starfish will always remain the same as it was three years back, with the same promise that we're going to throw people back into the workforce and transform their lives. Does that work, Debra? Does that make sense?

Debra: Yes, yes, it does.

Subs: So do you want me to go through the website and the contact details for everybody?

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Debra: Absolutely. Yeah, tell people how they can get a hold of you. We always do a transcription of our podcasts, because we want them to be fully accessible, so you can also, once the transcript is up, you'll be able to see that information written as well as hear it verbally.

Subs: Okay, sure. Thank you very much, Debra. Wow, that's great. I love it. Look at the amount of impact your podcast is going to create for society. I just love it. The good thing about these podcasts, it can go to a million people, right? Just by using social media. I love it.

So for anybody who wants to understand Project Starfish more, here's what you need to do. So Project Starfish, the website is www.PStarfish.org. So that is our workforce development and internship company. If you want to reach out to us, it's so simple. Just send an email with your resume or your request to HR@PStarfish.org. If you want to reach us by phone, it's so simple, again, which is 781-262-0520. If you don't get us, just leave a voice message; we'll get back to you. So if you want to reach out to me personally, it is Subs@PStarfish.org. If you want to find out all about what we do, simply go to our job seeker's page, which is also very simple, which is www.PStarfish.org/ForJobSeekers. You'll be able to see about four videos, two audios and you'll be able to know exactly what you can expect out of Project Starfish.

Debra: And how about on social media? I know you're on social media. How can people find you on social media?

Subs: Sure. Awesome, thank you. I forgot that, actually. So we have a really good presence on Facebook and Twitter. So what we're doing is we are actually hosting kind of a knowledge session every day called 60 Minutes 2 Impact, which is we bring professionals from different companies to share their experience and knowledge on 60-minute calls. We call these 60 Minutes 2 Impact. You can find us on Facebook at www.Facebook.com/PStarfishGlobal. And you're going to see the knowledge and invites and all that stuff, which anybody can participate.

And we are on Twitter. Who's not? Right? So it's ProjectStarF1sh. So just remember the "F1" instead of "I". So it is ProjectStarF1sh. F1 is the help key on your computer. We are all about helping people.

Debra: That's good. Well, thank you so much for joining us today. I really want to use this podcast to really talk about innovative programs and different ways that we can really tap into the human potential. I'm going to close now, but I do want to remind everybody that the only disability is not being able to see human potential.