Hello, this is Debra Ruh, and you are listening to Human Potential at Work. I'm really excited about our guest today. Doug Foresta is joining us. And I'm going to let Doug tell you a little bit about himself, but I do want to note that Doug has been a friend a really long time. Doug has been in the same industry that I'm in, really supporting people with disabilities, for a long time, and Doug also is my producer of this podcast. So I'm really honored to have Doug on as a guest.

So welcome, Doug.

Thank you so much. I really appreciate it, Debra. It's such an honor to be on. I really appreciate you having me.

Yeah, I'm very excited about the work that you do and certainly about the way that you're helping me with my work and my voice. Do you mind telling our listeners a little bit about your background? Because it's a real varied background, and to me, a very interesting background, too.

Sure, absolutely. I always like to say that I didn't really do anything productive with my life until I was about 30. But my background actually -- that's not entirely true -- my original background, I started off in marketing and advertising, and I've been a playwright for 20-something years. I've always been very interested in stories and I've always been very interested in voice.

I kind of found my way into social work, did that for about ten years, and got my masters in social work, became a licensed therapist.

Maybe about eight years ago, I think it's been about seven or eight years that you and I have known each other, Debra, and I started doing podcasting. I was speaking all across the United States and some other places across the world, and I wanted to have a way to get out there -- my son was two or three at the time -- and I wanted to have a way to get my voice out there without having to travel a lot, and I discovered podcasting. My business coach told me about podcasting. I started on Blog Talk Radio; that's how you and I met.

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Since that time, more people started asking me, "How do you do that?" and little by little, I found that I was doing more of helping people with podcasting and sharing their voice than I was doing therapy or social work. And so in the last couple of years, I really morphed into full-time producing podcasts and also helping people, training and coaching others to start their own podcast.

Debra: And Doug, you also have experience in the workforce, talking to leaders in the workforce. Do you want to elaborate a little bit on that?

Doug: Oh, sure, absolutely. I produce podcasts for workforce organizations, like the National Association of Workforce Boards. I'm really passionate about work as a topic, because to me work is so essential to the dignity -- of having dignity as a person, especially in our society. One of the first things people ask when you meet someone at a party or something is, "What do you do?" What they mean is, what do you do for work. And I think work to me is such a -- it's so much a part of our identity and it's ideally a way to express who we are, and so I'm very passionate about workforce issues.

I should mention, too, that I started off -- my very first job in social work was actually mentioning two group homes for people with disabilities, and I actually have lived -- I've done shared living with a person with disabilities, too. So I started off actually in the disability field.

Debra: Yeah, I always said it was interesting, sort of the parallel of our careers. I remember very distinctly that you had sent out some post on LinkedIn, I believe, or maybe it was Facebook, saying that you were interested in getting guests for your podcasts, guests that were doing things that were making a difference.

Doug: That's right.

Debra: And I responded to that note, and we started talking. That podcast is still available out on iTunes, and the hundreds and hundreds of other podcasts that you have produced and that you have created yourself. I want to brag about you just for a second, Doug. Do you mind talking about some of the leaders that you've interviewed on your podcast over the years?

Doug: Sure. Well, you know, one of the things I think that's really cool about having a podcast, and this isn't just about podcasting, we could just as easily be talking about having a YouTube channel or some other platform. And I know you do things like AXSChat and you have other platforms, Debra.

But one of the things that's been amazing for me is that I've been able, over these past eight years or so, to interview New York Times best-selling authors, Academy Award winners. I've interviewed over 1,000 people. Some of the people I've interviewed include Thomas Moore, Care of the Soul; Barbara Sher,
Wishcraft; I've interviewed Rob Fried, former CEO of Savoy Pictures and executive producer of Rudy and Hoosiers. I've interviewed Demian Lichtenstein, who people might not know by name but he produced all of the U2 videos that you watched in the 80s, like "I still haven't found what I'm looking for," "With or without you," movies like 1,000 Miles from Graceland.

So I've interviewed many, many people that were at the top of their profession. One of the things I found, one person put it to me this way -- we all put our pants on one leg at a time. And so one of the things I've learned is we're all human beings having an experience. I used to be so scared to talk to these people, but now I realize that we're all in the same boat.

Debra: Yeah, and we're all just people doing our best.

Doug: We're all just people doing our best.

Debra: That's right, and one thing that I loved about how our relationship continued to evolve was as my new book, Tapping Into the Human Capital, hit the shelves, you were like, "You know, you really need to get on some podcasts." And so you actually worked with me to get on podcasts from all over the world and some radio programs.

Then I remember we got to the point and you said, "You know, Debra, I think it's time for you to have a podcast." Because a lot of guests that I want to have on this podcast, I think in some traditional mediums, they're not going to get the attention that I think that we can give them on this podcast.

I'll be honest, I feel like I'm still honing my skills. You mentioned the AXSChat that I host with -- I founded and host with Neil Milliken and Antonio Santos. It's one of the world's largest Twitter chats, and we just passed our billionth Tweet, and it's just amazing what we've done on that chat, and it's a wonderful medium. But I remember you were saying, "All of that's great, but I think for you to continue to hone your own voice, you should do a podcast."

And why? Why did you think I needed to do that, Doug?

Doug: You know, it's interesting because there were times over the years that you asked me, do I need a podcast, and I'd say to you, "No, I don't think you need to at this point." But I think it was the opportunity to really share your voice in your own way. It's not just about the podcast and the number of downloads. It's really, to me, also about the opportunity to put your voice out there.

And Debra, one of the things we were chatting about a little bit before we started was the connection between voice and human potential. To me, one of the things that I see is that one of the ways in which we squelch human potential is by
squelching the voices of people. We say, these people don't have a voice, these people can't say anything meaningful, and conversely, when we allow people to share their voice, then they're able to -- it helps them to reach their full potential.

I think one of the things that you do so well, Debra, is you give a voice to a perspective that people may not think about before, because of your own experiences with your daughter. You give a voice to help people see the human potential in others, and I think that's such an important part, when we think about unleashing human potential. If somebody said to me, "Well, how do we do that?" Well, we could talk about persons with disabilities, or we could also give them a voice. And I think the podcast is allowing both you and them to have a voice.

Debra: Yeah, well said, and I agree. I really want to take my work and let others have a voice, that sometimes they're not being heard. But I'm excited. We're going to be interviewing a lot of really cool guests coming up in the near future, and I'm going to continue to do some solo podcasts as well, because, Doug, you're really encouraging me to make sure I don't just have an interview voice but I have my perspective as well.

But one of our upcoming guests is Rosemary Musachio, who has worked with me for many years, and Rosemary was born with cerebral palsy, and I've actually talked about Rosemary on this podcast before because she inspires me. She's just an amazing woman. Rosemary once told me in an email that when she lies down flat, she can only blink her eyes. So she needs somebody to support her pretty much 24 hours.

And so sometimes people meet Rosemary, and Rosemary cannot speak, so I'm going to come back to that in a minute because, wait a minute, Debra, you just said she's going to be on the podcast, and she can't speak. She can't verbalize.

Doug: Now you have to tell me. I can't stand the suspense. I have no patience. You've got to tell us how are we going to have her on the podcast if she can't speak?

Debra: Right, and she can verbalize. She can make some noises. But what she's going to do is, I'm going to send her the questions, we're going to agree with the questions, and she's just going to answer the questions using her voice synthesizer.

Doug: Nice.

Debra: And so when we do the podcast, she is going to have the questions queued up. I'm going to have to be a lot more organized on that one. And so I'm going to ask her the question and then she is going to let her communications device speak for her. But she's also going to be on Skype with me, and if she wants to make additional comments that we didn't plan for, I'm going to read those comments for
her. And then she said to me, this was so sweet but at the same time sort of broke my heart a little bit, she said to me in an email, "Well, should I not verbalize?"
Because she's like, "Uh, uh," she'll verbalize noises, and I'm like, "Are you kidding? Verbalize away, Rosemary." I want her voice to be heard.

She was born this way. She's an amazing woman. She has something to say, and we have something to learn from her voice. And so it's exciting.

Doug: That's a very important point. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to step over you there, but that's a very important point, that we don't need to -- when we talk about voice, we're not just talking about physical voice. People can have a voice even if they don't have a physical voice.

Debra: Right, right, and I think we forget that sometimes. I also think, Doug, that we get afraid of what we don't know. Rosemary loves to travel, and she says that when she travels, often people are in some sort of service situation where they're trying to help her, they will not talk to her. They talk to her companion, they talk to her mother, but they will not address the questions to Rosemary. And Rosemary finds that very offensive, because she's very well-educated. She's the chief accessibility officer. She is a global expert in her field. Yes, she looks different and she communicates differently, but she's not -- she's there. She's there, everybody.

So I think learning from what we're afraid of. I know sometimes when people are around people with very severe disabilities they get so afraid they're going to say the wrong thing or do the wrong thing. There's a lot of misinformation, as you and I both know, Doug, with this.

Doug: Oh, most definitely.

Debra: Doug, Rosemary has worked for me for -- she worked with me at TechAccess. When TechAccess merged into SSB, she worked there. She worked with a company called Interactive Accessibility. And luckily, she's now back with me at Ruh Global Communications. She's a brilliant woman, but she communicates with a different voice.

Doug: Part of what's happening, as we're doing this interview and you're sitting in Virginia and I'm in Massachusetts, part of what's happening is that technology -- the technology now is there in a way, to make it easier. If you think about it, we just live in an amazing time, in many ways, in that think about what -- I know you know this better than me because you used to do this work, Debra, and you still do, with access technology.

You think about what a smartphone can do and how much would that have cost to create something like that in 1999, if you even could. Now you just buy a
smartphone and it does so much. So the technology is there to help everyone, to enable everyone to have a voice, to empower people to have a voice, more than it's ever been.

Debra: Yeah, I agree, and I get so excited about technology and the internet of things and robotics and wearables and smart cities and all the things that are coming together for all of humanity, but certainly for people with disabilities and also other disenfranchised groups. Once again, using Rosemary again as an example. Rosemary is an amazing resource. She's an amazing employee. And quite frankly, other companies would be lucky to have somebody as talented, as loyal, as productive as this woman.

But I think there are employers -- I'll give you an example. There is a woman that I know that's a very, very talented woman and she had worked in many major multi-national corporations, a C level, and she had decided she was going to go and get another job. She sent her resume out, and this resume was just solid gold, and these employers were like, "Oh, we totally want this woman." One company flew her to California, and when she came in for the interview she was in a scooter. The interviewer, you could tell did not know what to do. They did not expect this woman to come in with such a visible disability. They looked at her and they said, "We're so sorry; the job has been filled."

I thought, "Oh my God, really?" Because this person let their fear take over. And so this very, very talented woman went and started working for that company's competitor, and really showed what she was made of. It becomes an interesting story, but at the time it crushed her. I understand the person was operating in fear, and anytime we're operating in fear a lot of bad things are going to happen. We're going to clog everything up and it's discouraging, but that happens with people with disabilities all the time, especially people with visible disabilities, but it's also happening in the workforce for people with invisible disabilities as well, that don't want to disclose because they're afraid people are going to assume that they cannot do all kind of things.

Doug: I don't want to steal away the tagline yet because I know we'll close with it, but when you talk about that the only disability is really not being able to see human potential, truly, I mean I think about myself, Debra, and I without my glasses I am blind. I mean, this morning I couldn't find my glasses and I can't do anything. I'm crawling on the floor to find them. They dropped off the nightstand. I'm crawling on the floor, trying to feel my way to find my glasses. I'm really, really blind without my glasses.

And glasses was a technology that came along, that enabled me to do what? Now I can drive, I can do all these things, and now I'm not disabled, right? I'm not a disabled person. Disability in itself, I think the entire construct of disability, as technology grows, as we have exoskeletons, as people get up out of their
wheelchairs and start using robotics to walk, that it's going to obliterate the entire construct of what it means to have a disability.

Debra: I agree. And this morning you were disabled, as you were crawling around on the floor.

Doug: That's what I mean. That's right. How many people have extra parts that they weren't born with now? The knee replacement and the hip replacement and all these things that now are allowing us to function, and I think we ask the wrong question. When we think about human potential, I think we think about -- well, first of all, we don't even ask a question; we just accept the story. Well, that person can't do that. Instead of saying, what do we need to do? What do we need to do to really empower this person, to unleash the potential that's inside them?

I think that's what you do so brilliantly, Debra, is I think you are a voice for that second approach.

Debra: Thank you, Doug. That's a huge compliment. What I think is so cool about everything that we're doing, and about that statement, is that what we also find is when an employer takes the time to really figure out how to include a person with a disability in their workforce, in a real meaningful way, everybody else benefits from that. I've told some of these stories in the past, but I love the story about the deaf accountant working for Ernst & Young, that they came up with a solution for that person to work, and meeting with their peers, and everybody in the room's productivity went up because they were able to tap into that technology. And so people are really worth making the effort to make sure that they can be productive and their abilities can be tapped into.

I think it's also so important to note, and we're talking about this already, in that as we age, more of us acquire disabilities.

Doug: That's right.

Debra: I always need my reading glasses. I don't hear quite as well as I used to. Sometimes I don't think as well, it feels. But I've interviewed and talked to different people and I think sometimes -- I was on the stage speaking one time to a gentleman who had been cutting down limbs from a cherry tree and one of the really big limbs fell on him, and so at the time when I was talking to him he was in a wheelchair and he didn't know if he was ever going to walk again, because it was a really bad injury. He said, "The way people are treating me are so different than the way they treated me when I didn't have this scooter with me, this wheelchair scooter." He said, "I had no idea that people were going to treat me so differently, almost like in some ways I didn't belong in the same room, or in other ways that I was this fragile little flower to be careful with."
It has been very unempowering for him, walking this path, but it's making him more stubborn and so now he's just making sure that he's talking more about this so he can build awareness in his little circles, and then the bigger circles that he creates as well.

Doug: Well, as you said that, I was thinking about -- it's funny because you talked about how we met on LinkedIn, and we did, and we actually met in a spirituality group, and I know that you and I share that in common. To me, one of the things I think, too, is when we talk about being disabled, we're really talking about the body in some way, and maybe the brain, right? We're talking about something that's not working the way that we as society deem to be the ideal.

But when you think about our spirit, that's a whole other thing, and I really believe that there are many people out there who disable their own spirit and they disable other spirit, by holding back, by fear. That is, to me, the real disability. Look at someone like Stephen Hawking. I mean, Stephen Hawking, is he disabled? I guess he is, but he's sure done a lot more than a lot of us.

Debra: Yeah, I sure don't think of him as disabled. I just want to sit on the floor and listen to him all day long.

Doug: Yeah.

Debra: And I don't agree with everything he says. He's made some statements that I'm like, "Oh, I don't think that's true," but the good thing is he's done it because he's a brilliant man. He's starting a very valuable conversation. So I think it would be very sad to society not to have Stephen Hawking's voice being heard. And thank goodness for technology so we can hear his voice.

Doug: Right, and here's the other piece. We don't know where -- the dumb part for us, and I'll wrap up with this, but for me, the dumb part for us as a society, selfishly, what if the person who has the cure for cancer can't speak? What if the person who has the groundbreaking solution to world peace is in a wheelchair or has autism? This is something I love about you, Debra. It's not, "Oh, let's bring these people in because it's the right thing to do and it's nice." Let's bring everyone in because you don't know what we need as a society, we don't know where that potential is hiding. It's like digging for gold.

And if you say to yourself, "Well, I don't like that mine over there, so I'm not going to look for gold there," well, you may never find it.

Debra: See, that is what really makes my heart sing, because I so agree. I was listening to a story yesterday about a young man, he was very, very close to his grandfather, and his grandfather died of pancreatic cancer. They found it and then he died within three week. It was very sad and just really crushed this young man,
without a disability, but he was like 13 or 14. And he actually went on to figure out a way, with a test strip, he had no education in this, but he figured out a way to do early diagnosis of not only pancreatic cancer but I think it's lung cancer and another one as well.

But wait a minute, he's just a young guy. What does he know? He hasn't gone to college. Well, he really tapped into something and he's going to save millions of peoples' lives. Millions of lives.

And so I really agree. If we decide that Rosemary's voice is not valid because she has a disability, or my daughter Sara adds no value because she has Down's Syndrome, we lose as a society. We lose as a society, because what we can tap into and the innovation and the productivity gains that we're seeing when employers really do include people with disabilities in their workforce, and retain people that acquire disabilities in their workforce, or they tap into the future of work and those kind of innovations, so that maybe I need to have a stand-up desk instead of a sitting desk because I actually wrenched my back this weekend doing gardening. Or I have MS and my back is acting up. And so that people can take care of themselves in some cases, so they don't have to go to HR and ask for an accommodation.

I mean, we have got to think differently, and I love what you said, Doug, because I really, really, truly believe that the only disability is not being able to see the human potential.

Doug: Amen, Debra. Look forward to continuing the conversation with you.

Debra: Thank you so much, Doug.

Doug: Thank you.