

Ramona Schindelheim:

You are 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. I'm joined today on the podcast by Bijal Shah, the new CEO of Guild. Bijal, welcome to the podcast.

Bijal Shah:

Thank you. Thanks for having me, Ramona.

Ramona Schindelheim:

So happy you're here. Today we're going to talk a little bit about your new skilling bundle about durable skills, also the new partnership with the US Olympic and Paralympic Committee. But first I want to talk a little bit about you and your new role at Guild. Actually, you've been at Guild for a while before taking this role. So how long have you been at Guild and how long have you been the new CEO?

Bijal Shah:

You are correct. I've been at Guild for a little over six years, which in startup high-growth land is a very long time. I took over officially as CEO in April of this year. So I'm relatively new to the official job.

Ramona Schindelheim:

And what is your background? Did you start at Guild and what is, what's the expertise you bring to the role?

Bijal Shah:

My formal training and background is in engineering, when I got out of undergrad, I actually did a job called operations research. Today it's lovingly known as data science, so got a way better name as time has gone on. When I joined at Guild, I started off very much focused on how do we take the existing product and technology that Guild uses and figure out how to augment and scale it. We were just about to launch Walmart, Disney, and a few other very large employers, and so figuring out how to scale and serve a large employee population was the number one priority for the business. Prior to coming to Guild, I also worked in another high-growth startup and was focused on building out data products as well as the machine learning and analytics team, so it fit in well into my background.

Ramona Schindelheim:

And Guild, for those who don't know it works directly with these employers. You mentioned some just now, Walmart, Disney. Explain how you go in and help them expand education for their employees and we'll go from there.

Bijal Shah:

Yeah, so I would say we do two primary things for our employer partners. So just to start off, we work with the world's largest employers and we help enable their talent strategies. So we go in two forms. One is many of our employer partners have large frontline employee populations, and they're looking to help skill those populations and to help get them educated. So finishing things like high school diplomas, getting your associates, your bachelors, your masters, et cetera.

And so we provide a wide offering of programming that we partner with learning partners to help curate and offer to these employer partners. And we provide coaching services alongside enrolling in and continuing to persist in educational opportunities. In addition, we also work with employer partners on very targeted skilling. So if they have a desire and need to upskill or reskill a specific population inside of their employer populations, we work with those employers to figure out what are the critical pathways inside of that employer and how do we help people navigate the lifelong career journey required to get from point A to point B.

Ramona Schindelheim:

So each of your employer partners has a different need and a different offering to their employees. Give me an example of if I was an employee at one of these big firms, give me an example of how this might play out.

Bijal Shah:

So, I'll give you two different examples. One example might be an employer like Chipotle. Chipotle offers this benefit to their entire employee population and they offer both a broad set of things that the employee can embark on. So you're interested in business administration, you can get a bachelor's in business administration, but you also might actually be someone who works inside one of their stores and you're looking for opportunities to move into management. And so they have very specific programming designed around moving you from that entry level role into a store manager role. And we help support those things as well. And so for Chipotle in particular, from a mobility perspective, those members, crew members is what they call them at Chipotle, who go on to enroll in guild programs, they're six times more likely to move into manager positions than those who do not

Ramona Schindelheim:

Do the employees tend to take advantage of these programs?

Bijal Shah:

One of the reasons why we think there's so much demand for what we do is because we are solving a problem that today doesn't really get solved in the United States in other ways. These people are craving learning opportunities. They want to get their associate's degrees or bachelor's degrees, they want to further educate themselves, and the alternative is taking on student debt. And this is a way that they don't have to do that. And so they get super excited about the opportunity and sometimes we do have to quell the demand or make sure we're helping to mitigate and ensure that we continue to stay within the employer's budget.

Ramona Schindelheim:

And also, this is really good for the employers because I've talked about this with different guests and read that it's more expensive for a company to go out and recruit, onboard, and bring in new talent. And if they can home grow it and they keep people working with them, then they have built in source for talent.

Bijal Shah:

Yeah. I mean, our data shows across our broad employer population, those who go through Guild are two times less likely to leave their employers than those who do not. And so there's an immediate

retention benefit or those populations. We also see benefits in attracting talent. When people are thinking about employers of choice, one of the things that I think folks are thinking about are how is the employer going to invest in me as the employee in a way that outlives even working at that employer or the specific job I have right now? And so there's been a lot of work we've done to understand what's, we call it the halo effect, of driving talent attraction. And as an example at Disney, one in four of the applicants who apply to Disney say that their program, it's called Disney Aspire. That's what Guild powers, it's called Disney Aspire. It's the primary reason why they decided to join an hourly job at Walt Disney.

Ramona Schindelheim:

That really makes a lot of sense too. And you said it before, schooling up-skilling can be expensive and this can be a way to work and earn money and learn at the same time, which is very important today because technology is changing everything.

Bijal Shah:

Yeah.

Ramona Schindelheim:

You have a new skilling bundle you call it, and it's about durable skills and closing the gap for the frontline workers. Explain how that works.

Bijal Shah:

One of the beauties of Guild is that we sit at the intersection of the world's leading employer partners and some of the leading academic institutions that are designed around working adult learners. And so one of the beauties for what we do is because we see across both of those stakeholders, we have the ability to identify opportunities or gaps that exist in the market. And one of the gaps we identified based on our employer needs was things that would help enable their employee populations to have durable skills. And when I say durable skills, I mean things like critical thinking, risk assessment, communication essentials, problem-solving skills to adapt to any situation. Those are what we mean by durable skills. And regardless of what happens with AI and advancements in artificial intelligence, these skills are not going to go away and that's why they're called durable skills.

And today there's not a lot of programming that specifically hits on those topics and ensures that regardless of what type of employee you are and where you work, you're learning and practicing and understanding how to develop those skills. And so we worked with our learning marketplace of partners and developed and designed new programs that allow for employees to actually get those durable skills. And so we RFP'd a process with our learning marketplace, we run a really robust process. We interview those learning partners, they submit their ideas for how they would design a durable skills program, what that would look like, what the component parts are. We vet them, we look at different pricing options, and then we go back to our employer partners not with one option, but a curated set of options.

Ramona Schindelheim:

How does it work practically? How do you teach someone problem solving?

Bijal Shah:

I think one of the beauties is that there are ways inside of our organizations today and learning methodologies like case studies to help people understand in this situation what would you do and how would you adapt to that situation? And as you know, business schools have been teaching the case study method for a long time. And so applying that to a broader audience and to a more frontline audience is one way of adapting content in a way that is relevant to that population.

Ramona Schindelheim:

These durable skills, or some people call them soft skills, seem to be the number one requirement or maybe the number one request that employers have these days. Tech skills are very important, but the idea that you need someone who could be collaborative, you need someone who can solve your problems, and a lot of that does come through experience. So it's interesting that there's actually classes that we'll be trying to teach these. And are they self-guided?

Bijal Shah:

They're self-guided classes meaning you can take them at your own pace. We work with three different providers, so they come in different formats and different lengths of time. Pathstream is one of our providers, Springboard is another, and the University of Denver is the third. And they do come in different flavors in terms of the format, the length and duration of the program, and what you actually get out of each one of them.

Ramona Schindelheim:

And has it rolled out already?

Bijal Shah:

It just rolled out, actually. We just announced it. And so we're excited to see the results and what the adoption and pickup looks like. This is our second bundle, if you will. About nine months ago we launched an AI skillings bundle, and we've been super excited about the adoption and uptake we've seen in the number of our learners wanting to embark on journeys that allow them to better understand how to apply AI to their everyday jobs.

Ramona Schindelheim:

I may have to take that course myself because I still have my own doubts about AI and I'm still a little weary of it. So how is that playing out? How are you showing AI tools and learning to those employees?

Bijal Shah:

Same way. We have a curated marketplace of offerings. We RFP'd our learning partners and said, we're looking for different programs designed for the entire employee population. So everything from frontline workers all the way up through corporate executives. What do you have? What is the outcomes you've seen to date? There wasn't a lot in this space, so people were generally creating things from scratch. We saw a 900% jump in enrollments from the previous year for folks interested in AI programs. And so there's a lot of demand. We're still early in learning what the outcomes are and the application of what that looks like. And so I think as we round out to about a year of this program being rolled out or these bundles being rolled out, we'll have more data back on exactly how employees are using it and what benefit employers are seeing from it.

Ramona Schindelheim:

And I would imagine the employers are very interested in providing that though, because I think it was January, I was at the CES conference, Consumer Electronics Show, now called CES. Every single employer on the exhibition floor had something on their banner that said AI. So it feels like the employers very much are using it to some degree or want to, so having employees who can also use it is very important.

Bijal Shah:

Yeah. And we have an example of a learner, her name's Sarah. She works for one of our financial services partners. She worked on a strategy and implementation team, and she took our machine learning certificate program and she's been able to use that to do two things. One, educate her coworkers on different ways they could be using AI, but also just incorporating it into her day-to-day work to make her communications more pointier, to help enable her to do her work faster and more efficiently and reduce some of the, what I would describe as broad work.

Ramona Schindelheim:

How do you vet that it's going to be used ethically, that it's going to be coming from a good source? How do you vet that

Bijal Shah:

As part of the RFP process we talk to the learning providers in our marketplace about how they think about it. One component of the bundle is ethics. That is just an inherent part of teaching people about how to think about the ethics of AI and how to responsibly use AI. It's a module or a course you can sign up for as part of that. And then we do talk to the learning partners about how they think about that, how they'll incorporate it in. We're still so early, Ramona, that I think there's a lot for us to learn. And more than anything, I think we're still at a place where the output actually does need to be vetted and folks need to better understand what the output looks like. As an example, I use ChatGPT very often, and I use it to help shortcut some of the writing I need to do or materials I have to put together.

And sometimes it spits things out and it does not sound like me, it sounds like a man. And I have to go back and be like, can you please rewrite this? I'm a woman and I'm Indian and I'm a little bit sassy. And so I think it's really important that it does have bias and it's important to use human judgment, but human judgment also has bias. And so it's like, I don't know which one's better yet, and we still have a lot to learn, but I do think it's an important thing to watch out for.

Ramona Schindelheim:

Very good point. Human judgment does have bias as well. And then we have that critical thinking, those durable skills that we are using.

Bijal Shah:

You got it. That's exactly right.

Ramona Schindelheim:

We're applying them to that. Before we go, I don't want to miss out talking about this partnership you have with the US Olympic and Paralympic committee. It really seems like an important partnership and it's about long-term career success for these athletes. Tell me how this came about and what you're doing.

Bijal Shah:

We have some of the smartest and brightest minds who work at Guild, and I'm so fortunate to work along these colleagues. This was not my idea, but it was an idea of someone inside the organization. And we spend a lot of time talking about populations and pockets of Americans who could really benefit from something like Guild. And one of our employees brought up, what about athletes? They spend all their time investing in their athletic careers, and then one day their athletic career ends and they need to find their second act. Can we be helpful to them in enabling their second act, making sure that they have the right guidance? Many of the athletes, which folks might not know, they don't actually get those huge multimillion-dollar sponsorships, they're living paycheck to paycheck. Yes, they might get some earnings from a medal, but that earnings is finite and it's for a specific purpose, but they don't necessarily have the means and the mechanisms to be able to have a sustained economic wellbeing, if you will.

And so it's a great population of folks on two perspectives from my perspective. The first is what is more inspiring than an athlete? These Paralympic athletes, they put their life, they have so much into something. They have grit, they have persistence, they navigate the ups, the downs. They are truly icons for us in terms of understanding what it's like to put your heart and soul into something and what if they could apply that same great grit and persistence, but to getting educated and to the pursuit of finding their second act. And so honestly, it just really beautifully aligned with our mission. It's a need that we know that these athletes have. And we were so excited when the Olympics and Paralympics decided, and Team USA in particular decided that we were the right provider for their athlete population.

Ramona Schindelheim:

And obviously the Olympics is coming up. So I imagine some of this additional education's going to come afterwards, right? Because everybody's got a lot of other stuff on their plate.

Bijal Shah:

We do. We have athletes who've already enrolled in programs, so they got a head start. But yes, and it's applicable to current and former athletes, and so many of them are former athletes who are not going to be competing in this Paris games or they're winter sport athletes. And so right now it's a good time for them to invest. But we do expect an uptick, obviously, after the Paris Olympics.

Ramona Schindelheim:

After people go through these particular courses, is there any connection to employers?

Bijal Shah:

Yeah, so that's one of the other incredible things about what we do. We have this large set of employer partners who really value folks who invest in their learning and development. And so connecting those athletes to new employment opportunities is very much a part of our goals. And we do have employer partners who are very interested in hiring former athletes, again because they have a level of grit and persistence and problem solving and resiliency abilities that I think are just naturally really great when you're thinking about employees you need inside your workforce, especially in an ever-changing environment,

Ramona Schindelheim:

What do you want to see for Guild in the coming six months, coming year?

Bijal Shah:

In the coming six months and year I would say the goals I have are relatively similar. One is I want us to continue to focus on ensuring we're delivering outcomes. When I say outcomes, I mean getting people the skills, our members and learners, the skills that they need and the education that they need to continue to find paths to sustain the economic wellbeing. Making sure the employer partners we're matching those skills with the employer's needs so that we're matching and aligning to their business strategy, making sure our learning partners continue to have access to and the resources that they need to understand how to better support these members and learners.

So very much focused on outcomes. The second is on innovation. So you saw the AI scaling bundle durable skills, but there's a lot of other stuff we're working on internally that I'm just excited for us to continue to roll out in the coming months or years. And then the last is making sure that we're actually building a durable business ourselves that continues to last for generations, and that we have the right foundation to build off, continue to grow our impact over time.

Ramona Schindelheim:

Bijal, it's really great to talk to you. Thank you so much for taking the time.

Bijal Shah:

Thank you, Ramona. Thank you for having me. I really appreciate it.

Ramona Schindelheim:

I've been speaking with Bijal Shah, the new CEO of Guild. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, Editor-in-Chief of WorkingNation. Thank you for listening.