

AWIA America Works

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SPEAKERS

Trish, Dr. Lee Bowes, Steve

S Steve 00:10
Welcome back to the At Work in America show. My name is Steve Boese. I am with Trish Steed. Trish. Good morning. How are you?

T Trish 00:16
Good morning. I'm fantastic, actually. Guess what today is?

S Steve 00:21
It is. We're recording this on a Tuesday, but that's all I can tell you. What what else is it?

T Trish 00:26
It is exactly eight weeks since my knee replacement, and I'm feeling truly fantastic and good. And I can walk upstairs with the bad legs, so that's like a huge accomplishment for me. That's been a lot of work, so yeah. That's thank you. I'm I'm having such a good day already.

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Steve 00:45

Good, that is good. Trish, this is the At Work in America show, and today is a perfect subject for our show. We're going to be talking about a huge challenge facing the American economy, facing the American labor market, and it's people who are out of the workforce who want to be in the workforce and are facing barriers of all kinds to getting engaged in work. Our guests to help us talk about those issues and talk about some of the solutions to those issues is Dr. Lee Bowes. She is the co-founder and CEO of America Works, which is an organization that helps people connect with employment, people who need often need help, like public benefit recipients, formerly incarcerated people, people with disabilities, veterans. It's a great organization doing great work and really fits themes we've talked about on this show for years. So we're going to talk about these issues and what employers can do and do better. So, Dr. Bowes, welcome to the show. How are you?

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Dr. Lee Bowes 01:46

Thank you. I'm doing extremely well. Thank you very much. I'm glad to be here.

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Steve 01:51

Great to have you.

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Dr. Lee Bowes 01:53

Yes, I think this is a wonderful title. I like the whole thing. It makes it fun.

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Trish 02:01

Yes, I feel like it's it's meant to be right. The two of us coming together. Yes, and Dr. Bowes, as Steve mentioned, I mean we've done shows over the last six and six or seven years, especially where we focused in on many of these topics individually. So I think it'll be exciting today for our listeners who are business leaders, business owners, HR leaders, and people where this is an important thing to understand what they can actually do to help people who might want to reenter the workforce and might not have had that opportunity in the past. Could you maybe take a few minutes and just tell us a little bit about yourself and about the organization and what that means to you?

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Dr. Lee Bowes 02:40

Yes, well, I have been doing this for many years, and I always wanted to run an organization that helped people. I knew that, and when I was at one of my graduate schools, I encountered somebody who was a family friend who used to say the following: "We'd be so much better off if social policy focused on employment and work instead of all these counseling program, income transfer programs, things that really are peripheral and get more people working. And I that just rang so true to me at that point. I had done enough work before I went to graduate school with people, low-income people, and I could see that they were desperate for getting out of the system. Nobody wanted to get these kind of checks. In fact, when Rudy Giuliani came to see us back in the day, and he was mayor of New York, he went into the classroom and he said, "None of you really want to go to work, right? And they were like, "What? and yelled and screamed. And they came out. He said, "They really want to work, don't they? And I'm like, "Yes, they don't want to be just told have another child so you can get more money. They really want that opportunity. And what I see is this incredible transformation in people who, you know, and we work as you might know with people on Social Security disability. Take some years to get into the system. We get them jobs. They voluntarily say, you know what, that check-it doesn't fill my soul. A lot of them live alone, so it's loneliness. I mean, they want a place to go every day, and when they get the jobs, they talk about oh, it's nice to have salary rather than a government check, but they all talk about I've made friends, and so it's it really runs the gamut. But early in my career, we looked at the issue of you know what do private companies really want to see, and one thing they did not want to see is, oh, help us help these poor people, help us help people with the barriers, and the businesses. I was getting my PhD at night. I was working full time in employment in Boston, and I just I would hear the same theme over and over. Why are people coming in? Saying, "Well, hire this person because they need a job, not I know what your needs are as a business, and I'm going to get you people who are going to meet your needs. And the other thing they told me was, the worst thing in the world is we try to do our best. We bring in some young person because the mayor has a big initiative on, you know, summer jobs programs or whatever, but the minute there's a problem, there's no one there to help pick up the pieces. Nobody's helping us. What are we going to do on this? We we went into this in good faith, but they they called it dump them and run, and I said, well, we are definitely going to do two things. One was never dump them and run, so we have a continuation with the employers that can last up to a year, depending on what they they would like. And then we also have we're selling a service. We're selling people who are viable to go to work. So it was kind of how we built the company. I built it with the knowledge of what the business community really wants to see and what they don't want to see, and I think that's why we've been around so long. That's why we have major employers who utilize us, and we continue to get more creative in how we do that.

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Trish 06:14

You know, thank you for such a vivid description, Dr. Bowes. One of the things as you were talking, it was a couple things I was writing notes as you were speaking is I want to go back about 30 years. So when I was out of college and my first real I'll call HR job was for a company that hired temporaries and so it was many of these same types of people right that we were recruiting and and going out and that was my first experience learning about work opportunity tax credits and the benefits to employers, so that that also is still being decided. I know currently, but I would say, in those 30 plus years, how have you seen the acceptance of having workers that may have a background that's not the typical background for that particular company. Has the attitude changed? Are we still trying to sort of get across? Because when I would go out and try and find companies, right, to to help hire these individuals who are very, you know, very skilled, very talented people who might have just come upon hard times, it was a challenge back then. Has that really improved in the last three decades, or where does that stand today?

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Dr. Lee Bowes 07:30

Well, I think we've improved in how we go about it. So I think that way. I mean, what what I, as you know, we especially in HR, you're always against the unemployment rates. Unemployment is very high. Difficulty is how do we find the right jobs because jobs are less plentiful. So at that point, we put more of our emphasis in our whole sales force that goes out meets with employers. When unemployment is very low, we have tons and tons of job openings, but it's really becomes imperative that we find the right people for those jobs. So we put more emphasis on our assessments and other things. So we're like the best thing against recessions or other. We we are a recession-proof business because we have high unemployment, we have low unemployment. I think, and I'm just going to say something not in keeping with the media response, but I found the unemployment data this month very interesting because it was the first time people were actually talking about the biggest issue isn't the unemployment information; it's the people who have opted out, and I have talked to so many people. Just they have no idea that if you're not looking for work, you're not in the unemployment standard, and so you know it because of your work. The general public doesn't understand it, but you know the two groups that that are really hit by this. Number one are the men between 25 and 55 who have slowly been opting out, and there are a whole host of reasons for that. Then you have basically recent college graduates who they're starting to look. I think they call it Generation Z, but it's the recent, you know, early 20s, mid 20s, up to even mid to late 20s, where people are just very discouraged about the opportunities that are available. They feel like the golden age has passed passed them by. This one older friend of mine said, "You know, I we were in the generation where I accumulated wealth, and now my job is just to give it to my children. Well, neither of her children are working. Well, maybe there's another way to look at it because perhaps we should be looking at it that the same type of effort we put in and the struggles, as you know. Going from your jobs as you've advanced in your careers, it doesn't come. It doesn't come like someone just gives it to you. And I think part of maybe the people opting out who are young is because they feel like they should earn more. They shouldn't have to work hard. They got these degrees. Why aren't they being appreciated for it? They want to start with six figures. I just had this conversation with someone recently. I'm like, why would somebody give you six figures when number one you've never earned it before? Well, because you know I have the education and I did some internships. It's like doesn't work that way. You got to get into the right company and work your way up, and it's hard. Well, I'm beyond that. It's like you, I wasn't. I, but you know, it's uh, it's each generation poses different issues and problems. Um, but that's that's kind of the missing the missing people in the workforce right now, which is a big issue,

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Steve 11:02

Doctor Bowes. I. I think that you're right. People do kind of misunderstand some of these headline labor market indicators and labor market statistics. But the one that the one that I I do think people understand is that person that they know who's opted out, right? Who's kind of just existing, you know, day to day, or living in the basement, or or has real, very real, you know, life circumstances that make it difficult for them to connect back with the workforce, right? Would you say that the folks you're working with in general is it more that hey, they're like as the the the story you told about when the mayor came to visit you, is it people really would really rather be engaged in the workforce and just they they the particular folks you're working with just need a little bit of a help? They need some support. They need some understanding, and they really they want to get back in versus say this, this general malaise kind of a thing that you're talking about, where people are just opting out due to frustration?

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Dr. Lee Bowes 12:08

Right? I think it's it's all of what you mentioned, but I think that in general, what we try to do is entice people in. Here's a real life case, and this person has been through what you were coming through, and they are now, you know, running their own business, or they are now successful and they've moved up in this organization. You know, we we had security guard, as you can imagine, one of the lowest kind of security guards working at a homeless shelter, because she could sit down there, and then the company she was so wonderful with people moved her to the Time Warner Building in New York, where she was in the ground floor sitting there. Well, the head of a huge corporation would be greeted by her every day, and he said, "I want you to come work for me. You know, and she's like such a great story because she couldn't even stand all day, you know, and her everything outlook, her health is better, everything is better, and you never know where these opportunities are going to come. So, what we try to give people is an idea that you should at least think about it and and try it. And at some point, we're doing like enticing them. We're also working with the government agencies to say we can't have a cliff. We can't have someone walk in the door, say they want a job, and immediately lose everything. And if they get cancer again and they have to go back on disability, they you know. And so we've worked with them to kind of ease what they call the cliff effect, so people can actually come in, feel comfortable, and go onto the company benefits and give up whatever government benefits they have. So it's our job to make it more enticing and exciting. But I hear that I hear the people. It isn't the first thing they say is about the money. It's always about the people they get to meet, and that's always been fascinating because you know you spend all this time saying you look more like corporate people, and of course that's gone out the window as you can imagine. But we always used to you know get them suits and do all this before they went to work, people's language changes, the way they dress and comport themselves. So it's it's very interesting because people want to fit in. So fitting in is a whole bunch of things. Some of it we do, but the transformation is so rapid when they actually go into the workplace. So we've learned that.

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Trish 14:44

I know when you're talking about working with these individuals who might be very skilled and might not have been in the workforce for a while, or have those things like you mentioned, the clothing, and that's always been a problem. So my my question would be around what about transportation? What role does that play in some of these more marginalized individuals being able to get to these workplaces? Is that something that you all help them with, talk with them about, strategize with them on how they can do that? If they don't, you know, they might not own a vehicle, for example.

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Dr. Lee Bowes 15:17

Yeah, there are very few big cities where there is public transportation available, especially 24 hours a day. I think New York may be one of the only ones that does 24 hours a day, and even a place like a Boston, all the things they've tried to do out in California. It's like they're always dreaming of having you know all this train, and that what we do is we look to helping people repair a car, if not purchase a new car, at least get their car up and running. We also do a lot with carpooling. We also do a lot, you know, in more rural areas or suburban areas. Talk To the employer about you know if somebody would pay \$20-\$30 a day, do you have an employee who lives in this part of the city who would be willing to take them out? As you know, a lot of these jobs are locating outside the city for cost and other reasons, and there are so many different ways that you can carpool, and/or you know other workers can be taking advantage of it. So we work on those things. We, you know, in a lot of cases, the state we're we're just expanding our programs in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and they have a very active job assistance program that helps just with car repairs, and it isn't just for people on public assistance; it's for the general public. So you can imagine the deluge of people who apply for that, and so that's part of what we do there. We help them process people who need to get their cars repaired, and we help them do that. And we do. We have to look at transportation, just as we have to look at childcare, medical issues, everything that goes into it. When they walk in the door, we're looking at all of those things. We're working with the whole person. We're not looking at just well, what are your skill sets and how do we force you into a job quickly? We're looking at what's kept you from getting a job. What are the things that have gone on in your life? We we do a lot with our classes on just exploring why they lost jobs. Now, what did you do that now you know you should have handled differently? And one big shock was COVID. COVID, of course was hard for employers and all. We have years and years of giving people computer skills again in a classroom, but when those parents had to teach kids at home, the fact that we gave out tablets and we gave out you know laptops and things for people to use in the home. Their learning went through the roof. Again, they had a practical thing. They had to learn how to use it just because their kids were taking classes, and the and they you know in these small apartments or wherever they were, there was more application learned on how to utilize computers there than we ever could get in a in doing it in a classroom. So all of that has taught us over time how to adjust what we do.

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Trish 18:30

Yeah, it sounds like it's really evolved so much. I mean, that kind of just goes back to my original question about you know how has this changed in 30 years? It's really to me. I love this approach of the whole person because I think that's a really good selling point to organizations who might not be seeking out these types of candidates because they don't a couple things they may not know how to do all of those things they may not have the HR or recruiting staff to handle right all of these things. So I think that's why partnering with your company really makes sense because you're sort of bringing them candidates who have already had this sort of holistic approach to who they are and how they appear to the hiring managers. I mean, Steve, have you? I don't know. Have you seen many things in your career where organizations were sort of doing this on their own and maybe struggling where they need this kind of a help?

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Steve 19:32

Yeah, I think so, and I think the fact that lots of folks attempt to try to navigate these issues without support are one of the reasons why we see a lot of failure here, or we see a lot from the employer side, right? And this is part of what we wanted to talk about today: the employers simply not engaging with these communities really at all, while simultaneously talking about, oh, we can't find anybody, or no one wants to work, or et cetera, et cetera, right? I mean, that disconnect is certainly a real one, right? Again, we've talked about it for years on the show with different communities of folks, whether they're folks who are disabled, folks who are formerly incarcerated, folks who are on the neurodiversity spectrum, right? Who need certain accommodations, right, to fit in the workplace. I still think there's a challenge there, right? And maybe Dr. Bowes, you can you can help us understand when you when you're working with your employer clients, especially newer ones. Perhaps is what do you think are some of the bigger bigger barriers that have come up in terms of getting them engaged? Is it their job requirements are a little too rigid, or they just worry about stigma, or is it something else? Like, what sort of is the employer barrier here?

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Dr. Lee Bowes 20:51

Well, again, I'll use an example from just to give you a sense, without painting the whole world of you know what happens to entry-level workers when they're thrown into new employment situations. We're in New York City. I don't know if you've seen all the bikes going by and all these electronic bikes that are going 60 miles an hour as you're trying to cross the street. My daughter was hit by one of the bikes and went to an emergency room. She's she's fine, but in an emergency room, I'm sitting there, and you know you lose your mind going like this is going to take forever, and they had to take her for an X-ray or whatever. And I see this young man just sweeping the floors, just going around sweeping the floors. Someone comes by and says, "Did you go on your lunch break? And he's like, "This is my first day. Oh, okay. Yeah, you're supposed to have had your lunch break like an hour ago, and he's just sweeping the floor. And so I stand up and I say, "You know, he's been sweeping the same part of the floor for the two hours I've been sitting here. Does he have a manager? And they were like, "Well, someone was supposed to come by and think. Oh no, they're out today. I guess not. And so we were able to engage in a conversation, and he was so apologetic to this young man. But I think that often we don't give people the appropriate start to their jobs and the hands-on training. What I, you know, it used to be, I'd go into Blue Cross Blue Shield or AIG, and there'd be a management person, and there'd be clerical workers all over the floor. And those things don't exist anymore. Like you'd know who the manager is because you'd walk in and say, "How's the person doing? And my staff, I'd say, "How did they do? What did the manager say? Well, they were late one day. Did you follow up? Find out why? Did we? Can we do something about that? Now it's not like that. So what it is is you know the shift worker at the hospital, where having somebody there on the first day to really train them. What what rooms are you supposed to sweep and where do you go? Just didn't happen. And in the vacuum of of this kind of not consideration for how someone starts a job and what they need to really help do that is just the complexities of running from an emergency room to you know as as they are trying to clean things up and it's all by triage and it's all as fast as could be. The thing that gets missed is here's you've got somebody who really wants to do well, but they're going to fail if they don't get the right support. So a lot of I think, especially now that the manager that you might have one day is not the manager you're going to get the next day. The hours you get one day, you might be on the third shift at a food service operation, and you started on the first shift. So, who's really the manager consistently? So, having us fill in that assistance, you know, being there the first number of days, helping the employer understand and us understanding, and when there's an issue, being able to come on site and help out, which is what we do.

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Trish 24:05

I think you've hit on some really key points there too, Dr. Bowes. I think you know that we as leaders, because we grew up in a very different world of work. I love to hear that you yourself are giving an example of how you're adapting, because I think that is one of the key messages for anybody listening to the podcast is it's our duty to sort of change the way that we're operating as leaders as managers and we're often stretched thin right which is probably why you're seeing fewer managers fewer supervisors whether it's in healthcare you know a factory setting or a corporate setting I think the other thing that you were kind of touching on, but I just wanted to call out is that you know the type of workers that that you all are working with. These are not just unskilled labor, never had experience with a job. I mean, it could be just someone who's been unemployed for a long time. Right, and sort of back to that idea of of tax credits. I mean, when you think about HR as being a cost center for me, that was always never the leading reason, but certainly was a factor. If I could, you know, bring money in in the form of tax credits into my organization while also simultaneously helping, whether it's a whether it's a Gen Z worker or a you know a Boomer, it's like it's it runs the gamut. I think there's just it's a win win, and I love that what you're describing is you're that advocate for both parties that's been missing, and I think that's huge. So I I just want to say I appreciate the fact that that's who you are, and especially in your example with the young man in the emergency room, you know, having an advocate stand up for you and maybe be able to phrase things in a way that he had never heard before. You weren't even truly involved in his work experience before that, and yet you've you've taught him something, and I think that's what it takes. Seeing someone as a real person, they're not a number. They're not just a new hire with a you know a new badge. They're a real person that needs your consideration and your advocacy. Really.

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Steve 26:12

One thing that hasn't come up in the conversation is how AI might be impacting some of the work you're doing with with the folks you're placing, as well as the employers you're working with, Doctor Bow, is that a consideration? Is that changing things at all for you and and the folks you're working with?

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Dr. Lee Bowes 26:30

Yes, it has. I think you know one of the more creative things is that once every employer designed their own application program, which they do. So go to go in and basically input all that information. It's very time consuming. So through AI, this technology person said, "I can get a universal application that then will feed into all of these companies. You know, whether it's Home Depot or Staples, or you know, they're all asking similar information. It's different orders. I can do that, so we can apply to 12 to 20 different companies, and it's kind of miraculous because the idea of just sitting there, you know, picking away at an application just to get to Staples at some central office where they're going to come back. I mean, I always kept saying, "Why is it? I go to Staples and they always have help wanted up as signs in their doors, but I come in and there's no one working there. Right.

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Trish 27:29

Right.

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Dr. Lee Bowes 27:30

What's going on? You know, and the managers are like, "Do you have anyone for me? It's like, "Well, you have to go through this central office. I'm like, "Okay, is it possible that I could send you someone if you like them. We can kind of check their application so it gets gets to you. And usually that's too complicated, but this has helped us a lot. So some what is a small project has had huge implications. I mean, I said for one of our programs, there were like five, seven hires just on Monday this week, and I said, "What happened? And they said they got all those applications and they got called back from these five companies and all offered them jobs. So it was like, boom. Okay, this is this is smart. And of course, for the people themselves, whether it's helping with preparing the resume, and the thing about AI, they can talk into a voice-activated computer, and a resume gets produced. A thank you note gets produced. Job searches become easier because they know geographically where they live, and AI will know all the openings in the area, especially if it's very specific, and so all of this has been helpful. What the problem we are having is that some of the government agencies are very uncomfortable because if there's any information that could be picked up that's confidential, like social security numbers or even addresses and identifying information, they want to be very, very, very careful because they don't want that to get into the ether, and so that's been a question for some of the government agencies where we have to do confidentiality, like the people on disability. So that's that's a challenge. We're working through it, and I think everyone's faced kind of with the the gift of AI and the challenge. What in the things that we're placing people in, we haven't seen AI taking over. What we have seen is things like security positions, which tended to be very clearly come into a retail operation. There's, you know, who the security people are. Now they basically have to also work back rooms and see cameras, and they have to really be computer literate, even to be security. They have to know how to utilize the cameras and get on and deploy people if they see something going on, so it's it's more complicated job. I mean, there still are the security positions where somebody's just at the front of a building or front of the store, but those are becoming fewer, and they want people with more diverse skills. So we find things like that, but not job replacement at this point. And a lot of the work that we do, like nurses' aides who go into homes and help with, you know, bathing and medicine administration and things like that, that's that hasn't changed really at all. Although they are some robots.

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Trish 30:36

Goodness, yeah, that's a whole nother show.

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Dr. Lee Bowes 30:40

But so far that hasn't been the big issue for us. I know that a lot of the young people feel that's why their selected jobs aren't there in the numbers they would like to see them. But I don't think that's true. I think that's in their head more than it is the reality at this point.

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Trish 30:59

Yeah, we would agree.

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Steve 31:03

Is suggesting that as well. Yeah.

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Dr. Lee Bowes 31:05

It's opportunity. It's just like what happened, you know, the the idea that people could work for themselves, the gig economy, where they would drive their own cars, and it was going to take away all kinds of jobs. No, it just expanded people using, you know, drivers to drive them to you know you can go to Lyft, you can go to Uber, you can go to a taxi cab, you can go to the subway, the busses. I mean, it's only expanded everything, and I know that's not. Some people want to say this is you know going to be constraining the labor force. I, I just haven't seen it that way. Every time there's a new innovation, it's like the factory workers, you know, back in the turn of the century, what happened? The owners figured, wait, there are markets all over the world. Let's expand the jobs. Let's let's produce more. It wasn't like, oh, we now have this one widget that's going to help us produce a tailor-made dress for someone in the town. It's like, no. It immediately goes into more and more of what we see, our economy just grows.

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Trish 32:05

Yeah, we would agree. I mean, I think seeing that you know people adapt, right? Whether it's you're right, turn of the century in early 1900s, or whether it's now. I mean, some jobs will go away as we as we know them, but that will also open up new opportunities for jobs we've never even considered before, you know. I think back to when I was in high school, getting ready to consider college or something else. It's like I would have never thought, even when I went into HR with a degree, like I would have never thought we'd be doing what Steve and I do now. So everything changes, and I think you know. I mean, Steve, don't you agree? It's probably we adapt.

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Steve 32:43

Yeah, for sure. Could be because the things we're doing now, many of them weren't even things, right? 15-20, 30-25, years ago, they just weren't. They didn't exist.

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Dr. Lee Bowes 32:51

Exactly. I lived in a town outside of the city, and there were tons of people in the publishing industry, you know, newspapers, but mainly magazines and everything. And I'll never forget when all of these things started to shut down, and because the men would be at the school picking up kids, and you know, the women were all working, and that you know, Substack came, and then all these online written communications and news communications came, and they were all basically the good ones. The good ones were all picked up to do other things, so their own careers evolved in many cases for the better. And you know, it's it. We have a way. This engine of the United States. That's why we're called America works because it does work, and you know more people need to work, and we believe in that, and we've seen results as you two have because of you the special positions.

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Steve 33:54

Yeah, that's a chapter. I think that's a great way to kind of put a bow on this conversation because it sounds like we're all pretty optimistic, despite all the changes and all the challenges. Like we all have spent, and you more than all of us spent so much of your time in your career working on helping people get access to opportunity, which we think we felt for a long time here is just about the most noble thing we can do. And so, first of all, thank you. Congratulations on all the the success over the years, and we so are appreciative of you and the organization, and inspired by it too. So, thank you so much.

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Dr. Lee Bowes 34:33

Well, thank you, thank you for having me. This has been probably the most interesting conversation I've had on a podcast.

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Trish 34:40

Oh my goodness! Well, you are so kind.

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Dr. Lee Bowes 34:44

Because you're very curious minds, and you're asking all these questions that no one ever asks me. So thank you. Thank you.

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Steve 34:53

That's cool. So we will put some links in the show notes to for folks to connect with America Works to learn more about the mission, get connected, get your employer as an employer get get get on board with this and again let's help people who want to work get back to work and again I said there's nothing more noble than that so I think we'll wrap it there. Thank you, Doctor Bowes. It's been so great to meet you and get a chance to talk with you today. Trish, thank you. Great to see you as well. Glad you're feeling great, and that's it for the At Work in America show. Remember to catch all the archives. Go to HRHappyHour.net. Go to YouTube. Go to Spotify. Anywhere you get your podcasts. My name is Steve Boese. Thanks to our friends at Workhuman, of course, and thanks everybody for listening. And we'll see you next time.