

- You're listening to the HR Mix Tape, your podcast with the perfect mix of practical advice, thought provoking interviews and stories that just hit different so that work doesn't have to feel, well, like work. Now your host, Shari Simpson.

- Joining me today is Kevin Robins, CEO of Mid-Atlantic Employers Association. Kevin joined the MEA team in 2011. He is a lawyer and graduate from Villanova Law. He started at Morgan Lewis and then joined SEI. After owning a small retail business, he joined MEA for the opportunity to grow HR related outsourcing services for small to midsize employers. Kevin, thank you so much for jumping on the podcast with me today.

- Oh, I'm excited for it, thanks, Shari.

- So Kevin and I have gone back a couple years now. I've had a great relationship with the Mid-Atlantic Employers Association and I really wanted to have Kevin on to talk a little bit about what employer associations are. So Kevin, let's start with this, what is your background and how did you start in an employer association?

- Yeah, well first point is I did not start when we are actually celebrating our 120th anniversary this year. So I took over leadership back in 2011, but I did not found it. My background, I'm a lawyer who is now a recovering lawyer, not an HR person, but I've worked with mid-size businesses my whole career in both the legal as well as financial services world. And when I was approached about the opportunity of leading an employers association, I was very excited because I think what it really is is becoming a critical resource for mid-size organizations that can't do everything themselves. And I'll talk more about the industry, but we've been doing this for a long time across the country and I thought it was a great opportunity to help businesses.

- I love that. I also love just hearing where people have come from. I love that you say you're a recovering lawyer. I'm sure sometime I will say I'm a recovering HR professional. As you think about employers associations, and for those that are not familiar, can you briefly describe what it is and how it can be really central in a role to the business community itself?

- Yes, that's a great question. I think if we look back to when we all were formed, that kind of gives us a sense of our purpose, which really has stayed the same. So there are 24 employer associations around the country. Most of us were started over 100 years ago, or you know, significant amount of time. So if you go back to the early 1900s, that's when industrialization was occurring, labor unions were occurring, and the the purpose was really for employers to work together to deal with all the HR employment issues they're dealing with. So we were formed by employers. It's funny, in our office we

have a picture board of directors from 1910, which is a really funny pic, funny, but you know, kind of back in that era, and I think that purpose holds true. Our goal is to help businesses deal with all the issues when they can't really afford to do it all themselves. You know, we work with businesses from 20 employees to thousand, 2000 employees, or somebody that has a location with that size. We're not dealing with the super large companies. They can do things themselves, but you know, we really become a one stop resource for businesses that have the same people challenges as larger companies, but just can't do it all themselves.

- So are employer associations akin to, like employee unions?

- No, I mean, and I think if you think we're, so we are all nonprofit associations. So our members, you know, or who we speak to, so the members are the businesses. So unlike some other associations where the individual is a member with us, it's the employer that's a member. So that's different from Sharon for example, where an HR person is a, you know, so because of that, our kind of focus is on what does a business need. Now we work through and with HR people, but we are giving solutions to the business, and that is a really critical aspect of what we do. You know, we're really focused on giving specific advice and consultation to companies and employers and we have lots of different industries, rather industry specific, all designed to help them, you know, help them grow and manage and deal with all the complexity of having people. And as we know, people are essential to every business out there. So, you know, kind of everybody needs us.

- As you look at not only what you offer through your association, what could a typical employer get when they are looking at joining an employer association? What are the resources that you offer?

- Yeah, that's a great question. So like I said, there's 24 of us, we cover most of the country. We work with probably 30,000 organizations as our members, and it ranges from, you know, the core membership for many, it's advice, it's HR experts, it's legal experts that help you deal with the questions coming up. And the question could be an employee issue, it could be this law just changed, what do I do? Do I need to change my handbook? What do I need to change in how I run things? But again, very individualized advice that we use. So all of us are very much of the people on our team know the people that are members. And when you call up any of our experts at any employer association, you're meeting somebody you know. It's not like a faceless set of customer service people. Beyond that though, you know, developing talent is a huge part of what all of us do. So we do, you know, we train probably 100,000 people a year in soft skills, computer skills, leadership development skills, which are again, are essential need of business both from, you know, developing leaders in giving somebody the right tools when they have a new job, as well as we think it's critical part of retention because that manager supervisor has an

impact on 15 to 20 people, and if they're not doing their job well, then you have the risk of the people that they work with. We also do a lot of HR support services, everything from coming on site and being an extra set of hands. We're actually running HR for organizations to project work like OD or handbooks, onboarding process. Yeah, so again, it's all founded on when you need an expert, we all have experts that we can lend a hand to so that you don't have to, you know, kind of look within. And it's also because of this association, we have members 40, 50 years with us, there's a heavy amount of trust developed. So most of our members would rather, you know, ask us first because they trust us, we know we're gonna do right for them instead of going and looking for all the different resources one might do. So it's kind of not a do it yourself model with somebody wants to go do all the research, but building that trusted bond and relationship. We also do things like background checks, engagement surveys, it's kind of, you name it, anything that touches on the HR side, we most likely have a resource for them.

- Well, and what a great idea, instead of having to spend, you know, hours of your HR time doing research, you know, you have that great tool. If you're an employer and you're curious about, hey, should I join an employee resource association, what are the criteria that businesses should fall into or kind of think about if they're gonna go down that road? I know you mentioned headcount as one of those things.

- Yeah, I mean I think, you know, I would say anybody can use this or need us. You know, I tend to speak to businesses, if you're too small, you know, under 10 employees, you may not have any issues, you know, it might be friends and family do business. Now you could argue that everyone's gonna have an issue, even with friends and family, which is kind of true, but we do get smaller companies that say, "Look, I'm gonna grow and I'm gonna do things right from the get go." And that's a, you know, it's a great way to think about, so let's put all the right policies in place and so on. But you know, really anybody can be a member, but we tend to find that 25 employees to 500, 1000, you know, where they have the complexity and they need resources, and sometimes they use everything we do, sometimes somebody's using one of us just for training and development. It's a very flexible model. It's not, you know, we all charge a membership fee, which is pretty affordable versus some other models out there. And then, you know, fee for services that you might need, but you also can just use a service like training without being a member. So it's, you know, and each region varies a little bit, but it's pretty much the way it works with all of this.

- Is there specific organizations that should really think about this? Or specific verticals that you've seen in your career that kind of adopt this more than others?

- Yeah, it's interesting, I think historically, we all came out of

manufacturing, because again, think back to our origins, it was the Industrial Revolution. You know, you've got unions, you've had all this complexity going on. Over time, I think it's more of somebody recognizing that people are important and I need help. So, you know, for example, with MEA, Mid-Atlantic, we're about 35% manufacturing, but about 20% professional services firms, and it's healthcare firms, and so it really, again, I don't think there's much difference with people. People are people. You know, we tailor our services to the organization. So we, you know, we have a lot of nonprofits, for example, and what we do is, you know, it's, I think about us as applying our expertise to the specific situation. you're not getting, we cut our answers with us. You know, our people, our associations aren't saying, "Here, go look at this piece of information and figure it out." We're saying, "Hey, let's talk about your problem and see if we can help you come up with a great answer." And I think that's, you know, there's, you know, as you know, there's lots of technology answers out there in the HR space, you know, that have very compelling, oh, look at this, look at how cheap this is. And you know, that's right for some people, but if you wanna have somebody, that trusted advisor you can rely on and you can speak to people who are experts, that's kind of what we all stand for.

- As you think back through your career with MEA, is there any organization or any story that you can share that really stands out of a customer who came to you with an issue and had like this really amazing outcome because of the relationship that they had with you?

- Well, you know, I can't think of one because there's so many, but recently, I reached out to a couple of members and asked them, "Can you share with us kind of what you were feeling about us is?" And you know, and I think the comments they made, and you know, was they just appreciate that the relationship and that everybody at our organization, their goal is to help them solve their problems. So that could be, you know, for this particular company, one time they had a very difficult termination relationship, and we helped walk them through it, helped them draft the agreements, and kind of give them the peace of mind that I'm not going it alone. I think it's also a cost image, they don't have to reach out to. So, and again, this is my lawyer, it says, oftentimes people say, "Well, I can't afford a lawyer, so let me figure it out on my own." Well, that's really bad if you do it wrong. The other is, well, I'm gonna go ask someone, and they may not know so much about these smaller issues like we do. So like every month our experts are taking, you know, 300 calls from our members. So whatever someone's onetime issue is is a busy of time for that one for us. I think the other part of it is developing your leaders. Again, in the last couple years, a lot of companies have seen this migration out of the leaders and the need and desire to bring the next generation into it. And again, they haven't done it before, they haven't done it in the last 20 years. So having somebody that can walk through and say, let's develop a plan that's not just training, but

it's coaching and mentoring and assessing somebody's care, you know, do they have the right skills to be a leader? And helping 'em through that process, it just brings a lot of reward, which again, is why I think we have members for 50, 60 years. I also am a huge fan of private businesses. You know, like I said, I was a general counsel of a public company, but I worked with, as clients, a lot of private companies. And you know, when you go out and you see some company that, you know, I'll never forget when I first started, one of our members had people on the line putting, you know, using their hands and doing something, but that component they were doing was in the Patriot Missile System that rate the update. And it's like, so then you start to think about every single thing you see in the world, somebody had to create every piece of it, and that kind of gets us excited, so.

- I love that. As we wrap our conversation, Kevin, what is, you know, one, two, maybe even three pieces of advice that you have for employers who may be considering looking at an employer association?

- Yeah, like I said there, you know, I'd first look in your region, you can either, you know, Google employer associations. There's also a site, which is where we all, you can find us all nationally. All of us, our first priority are businesses in our region. And again, that's that, you know, sometimes there's local laws and regulations that are very important to be on a state level, city level, it kind of depends where you are. So we, in Atlantic, we go from Maryland up to New York City, so we cover four states. But, you know, talk to us, you know, I always say when I get introduced to a business owner, just spend 10 minutes and let me understand what your town says, we might be a fit. So it's not a hard sell organization. Again, we're a nonprofit, so our goal is to keep members happy, but we're not right for everybody, but we certainly think it's worth a conversation.

- Well, Kevin, this was great, very eyeopening for people who maybe have never heard of or never engaged in an employer association. And as always, I love working with MEA. So thanks for taking a few minutes of your day to chat with me.

- Thank you, Shari, we love having you on our town halls too.

- I hope you enjoyed today's episode. You can find show notes and links at the [HRmixtape.com](http://HRmixtape.com). Come back often and please subscribe, rate, and review.