

Announcer: You're listening to the HR Mixtape. 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.

Shari Simpson: Joining me today is Derek Lundsten. He's the president and chief culture officer at LifeGuides, a transformative platform supporting conscious leaders and values-driven cultures. Life Guides empowers employees to learn, grow, and thrive by connecting them with certified life guides who share similar life experiences across 400 plus topics of personal growth, lifelong learning, and life challenges. Derek, thank you so much for joining me on the podcast today.

Derek Lundsten: My pleasure. It's great to be with you, Shari.

Shari Simpson: So I ran into your organization a few months ago at a SHRM conference, and I was completely blown away by the work that you're doing. And I just I really wanted to bring you on the podcast so we could talk about it. And I don't know, just tell the world just what is happening in this really unique approach you've taken to benefit. Maybe we can start with your origin story and how you got to wherever you were to inventing life guides and the work you do now.

Derek Lundsten: Awesome. Well, I can't take credit for inventing life guides, but I can say that I was there and seeing the idea at the founding and recognizing it for the genius that it is and the needed role that it can play in helping people in their lives and their work. in their career and whatever it may be. I have been an entrepreneur now for almost a decade and a half. I met my business partner, Mark, as well as some other business partners in an entrepreneur's forum about a decade ago. Mark and will bunker who was one of the early founders of match.com were sitting around they were talking about their experience having been caregivers for their aging parents and the recognition that they were well educated well resourced. privileges and access that many people don't have and they still know how challenging it was to be a caregiver as anyone may know that's a really challenging role and identity to take on someone's life and i kind of seen that experience secondhand with my grandparents and my parents paying that one What if we could build something that would help match caregivers who had been through that experience and had navigated this with people who are just starting that journey to help make it easier, lighten their burden, give them access to resources and a sounding board. Investor was that that model the quote unquote guides model connecting with someone who's been there and done that ahead of you apply it across any. Any life experience any life event any life challenge wasn't unique to caregiving although that was very relevant it was it was appropriate in any circumstance whether it be. you know, becoming a parent for the first time, or relocating for promotion, or across the country, or losing someone unexpectedly to transitioning from active duty military service to veteran and civilian life, you name it, there's hundreds, if not thousands of unique topics where the idea that you could connect with someone who'd lived that experience, and thereby they've developed certain

resources, certain stories, certain character that can be shared. It's what really makes us uniquely human. And in the world that we live in right now, where we can be technologically connected to people around the world, what better tool than to help find people that can be in service and support of others, in helping to be an, you know, an outlet and a source of wisdom and expertise and resources and navigating life. So that's what we're doing.

Shari Simpson: It's so exciting. You know, I think about all of those life moments that you go through and you just, you don't know where to start. You don't know who to talk to. And for your employer to be able to give you a resource, I just think it's really fascinating. So I want to get into some of the tactics. How do you, first of all, how do you find people that want to volunteer to be part of this service? And then after that, how do you match them?

Derek Lundsten: Yeah. So, it's one of the things I'm most optimistic about in humanity is your first question about how do we find people. And going back to where we started, when we started with caregiving, we targeted Facebook groups of caregivers. This is now almost eight years ago. when we were first experimenting with this. And we targeted brick and mortar organizations that were affiliated with that cause, the Alzheimer's Association and others. And we basically put out ads and said, hey, if you've been a caregiver and you'd like to share those experiences and help other caregivers in their journey, come talk to us. And what we found was there was a surplus way more than we had anticipated of people who wanted to play that role for other people and to share their story and to share their experiences and to help other people in their own journey. And as we evolved the company and evolved the mission into other areas, that same level of surplus of wanting people, wanting to help people existed, right? Back to optimism, you know, 10 times as many people as we thought would want to help, wanted to help, and that has continued to be the case, right? And what that means, what we found is that means that there's an untapped well of wisdom, of empathy, of compassion, of humanity that is waiting to be unleashed in support of other people. And so that's how we did it. And so we've now gone out to different organizations and digital ads and found our guides. And we now have a waiting list of amazing guides who want to help and help that. And a lot of it now is just driven through word of mouth, where someone's a guide and says, hey, my spouse or my partner or my family member would be an amazing guide. Can they apply? And we say, sure. Send them on over. And so that's how we started it. And then to your question about technology, you know, while the while the while lifeguides is a human service, it's built upon a technology platform. So if you think about, again, match.com, what it was for dating, or you think about Airbnb, how you can access experiences and properties and and those types of things through a digital interface, we're doing something similar, but we're doing it through the attribution of life experience. And so what we do is when we find people who come on to be guides, we attribute their demographic information, their location information, their experiential information, their education, their

profession, all these different details that make up a profile of this person. And that goes into the search, right? So when you go on and you say, Hey, I want to, I want to seek support in caregiving, you'll then see profiles of actual people that we have vetted that we've screened that we have trained and we have collected information to say this is why we think this person would be a good match for you and then the power still falls to that individual who's seeking the support because just like airbnb or max you see these profiles and you say i like that video i like that person i think sherry would be a good person for me to talk to let me watch her profile let me read about her and say yeah she would be and i go in there and i find a time that works for us and i book a session And if that session works out great, then we can continue to rebook our sessions. And if it's not great, or you want to get someone else's perspective, you can go book a session with a different guy. And after those sessions, you rate them. And we collect that information as well. And that all goes into the enrichment of how we do the matching, and how we do the algorithm and how we prepare. So it really is this combination of technology meeting human sovereignty and choice and personalities. And it's a really cool experience.

Shari Simpson: So as you've gone through developing this program, what are some of the challenges that you faced while, you know, kind of approaching something different than traditional coaching?

Derek Lundsten: Yeah, I mean, so many, so many different challenges. So one, as a starting point, We commercially really launched the business in earnest right at the start of 2020. So just prior to the pandemic is when we were going into a full-scale launch commercially, which as an emerging business, that was not an ideal time to be launching into this for a lot of reasons. And while in many ways, it's worked out in our favor as the market and as the world has evolved to recognize the need for a connection, the ability to connect with people online, the ability to ask questions and seek support and destigmatize mental health. That has all helped and works in our favor. But if you remember back to 2020, right around now, everyone was in full on survival mode and confusion. It was like, what are we doing? We just got to grasp whatever we can. And so that was particularly challenging. And then as we navigated that and responded to what was happening in the culture in the moment, We had to, one, keep the business moving, but we had to educate the market at a time where they were in their own emotional crisis and shutdown about a new way to provide service and care in a startup with a model that's never been done before, right? Peer support as a digitized offering, right? The prospect of educating our buyers and educating the market, particularly HR, which It's historically not known necessarily to be the first movers, if you will, on why this was a different and better approach to what they've been doing. It took a lot of time and a lot of energy, and it took a lot of work. And so that was a challenge that I think we couldn't have foreseen what would happen with the pandemic. And, you know, as we, our initial idea, which was to destigmatize mental health resources, we've certainly accomplished that in the

world that we're working in now, but in a totally different way than we would have thought. Right. And then obviously we have the balance of building a community of trained and qualified people. And then we have a whole level of you know, quality considerations? How do you manage the experience? How do you recruit guides? How do you manage the quality of that? How do you engage them? How do you educate not just the buyer of the of the service, but also the members, the employees and their families? How do you distinguish this product against others that they might have access to? How do you help them feel that they can use this and trust this and like this and share it? I mean, there's so many questions that we spent a lot and a lot of time I mean, this has been a ton of work building this company and getting to this point, but we're really at an exciting moment in the company's evolution and what we're doing right now.

Shari Simpson: How do you see, and this is probably a very weighted question, but how do you see the world of, I'm going to use the word holistic health on purpose, like the world of holistic health evolving and potentially the retiring of EAP programs. You know, it's one of those things where we have them in all our organizations, we talk about it a lot for our employees to use it, but it's such an underutilized resource. What are your thoughts?

Derek Lundsten: Well, that's a two-part question. So I'll say one, on the context of holistic health and well-being, I'm a full supporter, advocate, evangelist. This goes back to the mission and why we started doing this and helping people to thrive in their life wherever they are. So count me as a full yes there. To your second question about EAPs, why don't people use them or why have they missed the mark, so to speak? Um, I think, I think the world has shifted a lot, right? Worst and foremost, when you think about what EAP is, where they started 30 years ago. Right. I think they probably started off with with noble intent. Right. And they said, hey, there's a there's a there's a population of people that need support. Let's let's support them. And they built a model around that. And over the course of time, the business model EAPs became more about risk mitigation than it came became about actual support and care of the employee population. And what's happened over the last decade, especially as as the technology industry or technology access has exploded, is that people have a lot different expectations when it comes to their choices of what products and services they can use and what they have access to. And our lives have gotten more complex, if you will, because of the level of information that is constantly flowing to us and that we're continually vetting and screening for our consumption. And so the expectations for personalized care have shifted dramatically. The healthcare industry and the outcomes that they're chasing have also shifted significantly. Ultimately, that perception of stigma that existed with EAPs for two decades still very much is kind of rooted in there. And so, while EAPs have a noble cause, and they play a purpose, or they've created a space for us to exist, frankly, I think the shift around what people need, what they want, what their expectations are, particularly for emerging generations in the workforce, has changed.

And they want something that they can connect to with a human being, right? Not just the call center, but they want something that they have a relationship with. They want something that's not just about when something's wrong, but to your point, that can help them learn, that can help them grow, can help them express and get access to information and to tools and to resources when they need it. And they want to be able to do it quickly. They want it efficiently, and they want to hold that power in their hands just as they do with other tools like social media and other ways that we connect with one another right now. And so I just think that we're in the early stages of that transformation. And we're there for it and we're building.

Shari Simpson: So I'm gonna I'm gonna put on my risk aversion hat on. Because if I have this question, I'm sure our audience does too. How do you handle privacy in these relationships?

Derek Lundsten: Yeah, so part of the process by which we onboard our guides is through a multi phased interview process, as well as through a background check process. And then we have our own proprietary training and certificate process that we bring our guides through. at the conclusion of that training, which is then contained and maintained through ongoing human management support and technological interventions. Prior to them becoming a guide on our platform, they need to sign confidentiality agreements, and they need to sign code of conduct agreements to be on our platform. And so we have terms of service that govern all of that. And we even scented and created frameworks for our guides to play by the rules to be at our platform. And we've created certain levels of protection that come with that as well. And that helps to make sure that their experience and their risk is mitigated and that the quality and experience of our members and their families is high. Obviously, there's always risks, but we do everything we can to mitigate those legally from a compliance standpoint, and we've even gone above and beyond from a technological standpoint to protect the data. So, we are a HIPAA-compliant platform, even though we are not governed by HIPAA standards. We're not providing patient care. We've built a number of escalation and security procedures and to help to maintain the privacy and quality of our members and our guys and so that's constantly happening and we consult you know the best and brightest minds when it comes to these topics on a regular basis to continue to enhance those. enhance those services. But yeah, it's an important question and one that every savvy HR leader is asking. And what I say to them, what I say to you is, you can trust that we're prioritizing this and maintaining that priority consistently as we grow and evolve the company.

Shari Simpson: Well, and you're so right. There's always going to be that human component when you're dealing with humans. So, you know, everything you can do to mitigate risk, I'm sure you're doing. You know, as you think about the future, how do you see life guides changing or expanding?

Derek Lundsten: Well, I mean, one is If you read a little bit about our very aspirational and real mission of affecting a billion lives around the world in the coming decades, the reach of which the

platform will have is going to grow substantially. How that can change is a lot of really interesting things, and I can speak to that, but on a simple level, We're focused on things that we're going to maintain be the same, right, for a second, which is why it's so important. So we will always desire to have a human connection. We will always desire to be part of a community. We will always desire to learn, to grow, to communicate and develop experiences. We will always have a movement towards hope and wanting to find someone who's been there and who's navigated that so that we can help You know that experience ourselves and then pass that along to lighten someone else's burden these are things that make us human these are the great qualities of being a human being and so as we bring on more and more guides and we build up more and more topics. The idea that anyone can come on and find someone just for them in their life circumstance in those moments of triumph or in struggle. will will be the platform for those people. And I believe that that's something that will be an expectation of employees as they work for employers. And I believe that outside of employees, employers, people want to have this tool. And we'll see life guides and the guides model explode around the world. And we'll create a entirely new job category of which if you're a good human being, and you want to share your story and help others, you can become a guide. And if you want to, you know, live your life better and learn, you can access your guide. And if you want to you know, develop new business models around that, we're going to be building that too. And so that's a short answer of how I see the company evolving. But we have a lot of work to do just to hit our first mission first.

Shari Simpson: I absolutely love that. As we wrap up our conversation, I'm curious, your perspective, having been in this field now and seeing how benefits are approached, what are some tips that you have having developed these relationships where we can implement inside of our organizations to increase supportiveness to our employees and to help honestly drive a more resilient corporate culture?

Derek Lundsten: Yeah, I mean, I think part of what what lifeguides brings is part of that answer to that question, which is personalization, right? Everybody's at a different stage in their life, they have different needs, whether back to your holistic health, whether physical or mental or emotional or spiritual or situational on whatever's happening in your career or transition or your life. And getting people connected to the right services and benefits that are offered by their employer is part of the role that we facilitate. Beyond just the human connection, because of the technology, we drive people to the appropriate services that are available to them. So say you come on and you have a a caregiving need and your employer offers caregiving resources and financial services and flexible time off and other things that you might not be aware of now you're going to be directed to that or say you're planning for you know a college student to go you're a teenager to go off to college and you need help you know preparing for that financially or from your time or your identity we can help with that and so just multiply that out across thousands

of topics we're going to enrich the overall benefits experience but doing it through a human relationship not through a transactional call center not through just a simple give them a document let them figure it out no we're truly advocates our people are there to say hey You know, I'm here with you in a relationship and I'm going to help you find what you need to get to the other side of whatever it is you're navigating. And I think that's a key part of where we can support these companies and where employees are going to be, frankly, asking for this type of service and support.

Shari Simpson: Well, Derek, thank you so much for taking a few minutes to chat with me. This is an exciting topic and I can't wait to see where your company goes from here. So really appreciate your time.

Derek Lundsten: Thank you, Shari. It's really been a pleasure. I really enjoyed the conversation. Look forward to getting to know you more.