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The #1 challenge in small businesses...retaining employee talent and the labor shortage.

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Martin Briggs:

All right. Well, great. Good morning, Birmingham. We are delighted to be here with you live here. Well, for most of you, it's downloaded on demand. So I do feel live because we actually have one of our wonderful guests, Andy Blake, here in person, right?

Andy Blake:

Yeah.

Martin Briggs:

And we're honored that you're actually in the office with us. We appreciate you taking time to be with us physically, if you will. Again, this is Martin and Kayla Briggs, co-founders and CEOs of the ULECx market. Good morning, Dr. Briggs, how are you?

Kayla Briggs:

Good morning. Doing well. Good morning, everyone. Hope your Monday is off to a good start.

Martin Briggs:

Yes, ma'am. Yes, ma'am. And so today our call, again, we're here every Monday at 10:00 in the morning to talk about all things faith in business as it relates to Birmingham. It's what we call a trifecta, right? Birmingham, faith and business as the Holy Spirit leads. It just happens to be that I was reading the newspaper with Birmingham. Now I've already known that our biggest challenge here in Birmingham, we're going to discuss the biggest challenge facing the economy of Birmingham, and that's certainly the talent issue or labor, finding labor, retaining labor, career development, all of those types of things.

Martin Briggs:

And this was motivated in part by my reading of the Birmingham Business Journal. As you know, I'm a big avid reader of that. I think that if you're really going to survive as a business leader, you need to educate yourself. And hands down, I really believe the greatest reading that you can do to feed your intelligence about Birmingham as a business leader is to read the Birmingham Business Journal that comes out weekly, so that you can stay ahead. Anyway-

Kayla Briggs:

We promise we don't get any kickbacks for saying that.

Martin Briggs:

No, there is no direct relationship between us and the Birmingham Business Journal, as much as I wish there was. But anyway, this was the May 21st through 27th volume 38 edition that came out a couple of weeks ago, and it was about restaurants. A new big problem, a year after COVID-19, threatening the future of Birmingham's culinary sector, a new threat has emerged, a labor shortage. It was funny

because it shows a restaurant. It says, "Shipley ..." I wish I could show this to you in picture form or somehow off the video. But the caption on the newspaper has a picture of the front doors of a restaurant called Shipley's, which it says "Immediate hiring needs. Cook positions." It's got the hourly wage there of \$13 an hour, and then another sign, huge sign says, "Due to labor shortage, we will be closed on Mondays at this time. Thanks for your support."

Martin Briggs:

The article goes on, which I thought was very interesting. Of course, I should have already had this teed up. And I'm going to read just the first couple of paragraphs there. It says, "While a few businesses were able to thrive over the past unprecedented challenging year, most found themselves struggling. Among businesses hit hard by COVID-19 were those in Birmingham's nationally-recognized restaurant scenes. Many of the metro's restaurants had to shut their doors, but some survived with help from paycheck protection program or PPP by shifting their business model. Some continue to struggle for customers as many of their former patrons continue to work from home. But those that were able to endure the toughest stretch of the pandemic are now facing a new challenge, a shortage in employees."

Martin Briggs:

I'm going to read a couple more paragraphs I thought were interesting. This is a lady's perspective, a business leader. "'For a lot of restaurants, this is a very hard time to find employees,' said, Michelle May, owner of Black Pearl Asian Cuisine. 'Every Chinese restaurant I know of in Birmingham isn't open for dining in, and the reason is no servers.' May's restaurant located in the colonnade along the highly-trafficked US 280 corridor closed in March 2020 at the beginning of the pandemic and reopened in July for takeout. While many restaurants have reopened their dining rooms, Black Pearl has continued with takeout only because May has been unable to find any wait staff. There are other reports of business leaders who have actually taken on shifts in their businesses that they never worked shifts. They're leading and managing their companies, but because they can't find workers, they're actually working shifts and delaying management or growing their enterprise, just so they can keep the doors open, and many of them not actually making money doing it."

Kayla Briggs:

And most of them are doing it most days of the week. So it's not even just patching over to a small degree, but they are really taking on full service.

Martin Briggs:

Exactly. Any other stories that y'all want to share that you have seen? Again, I've gone all into this and didn't even introduce our guests. Let me do that first. Andy's like, "Wait a minute here." So as we're discussing this challenge, we want to bring to you people in Birmingham that are a part of the solution. We don't want to be a system of information here at the ULECx Market in which we're always talking about the problem and never actually bringing you some tangible solutions.

Martin Briggs:

And we're going to break the call up into three parts. Number one, we're defining the problem. We're just going to get on our soap box and just complain. All right. We're going to do that for a second. And then we're going to get into direct solutions. How you as a business owner or business leader, what can you grab right now for you to grow and maintain your company with terms of talent? What is happening right now that you can grow with what tools are available?

Martin Briggs:

Then we're going to go into long-term solutions which are not quite cooked yet. They're in the pipeline of how we address all of these things. And then lastly, we're going to stop and do the greatest solution, which is to pray. Pray, pray, pray, pray. We always say pray first, and so that's what we're going to do. Oh, and I also forgot Andy's going to bring our devotional. I'm so excited about this call. I'm losing all my wits about me.

Kayla Briggs:

I figured that. Let's just make sure we get the intro in, and then Andy will take it from there.

Martin Briggs:

I didn't realize how excited I was about this call until I just started sitting here.

Kayla Briggs:

This is probably our number one, I know, pain point in the city, but it's all Martin and I's number one passion. So yeah, I can see and hear it all over. I think people are keeping up.

Martin Briggs:

Exactly. Well, let me introduce our guests. So we have here, Andy Blake is the executive director of Work Force Birmingham.

Andy Blake:

Work Faith.

Kayla Briggs:

Work Faith.

Martin Briggs:

What did I say, Work Force? Sorry, Work Faith Birmingham. Work Faith Birmingham was founded in 2013 in response to awareness of the need for job readiness training for individuals coming from transitional programs or challenging backgrounds to prepare them for their career track employment. Their mission is to empower adults when facing employment barriers with skills, competencies, and ethics they need to enjoy transformed lives through work and faith.

Martin Briggs:

We're very much looking forward to us hearing from Andy Blake, who in my mind is at the forefront of the thought process, as well as leading the charge from a faith and business perspective. He really is, from what I can see, the designated leader spearheading what we can do as the body of Christ to solve the single greatest challenge facing the Birmingham economy is the talent shortfall. Andy is the go-to guy. He's got his hands in everything. He's catching everyone who's involved and, in my opinion, the coordinator of what God is doing in Birmingham through the church to address this particular issue.

Martin Briggs:

We're also delighted to have our friend, Ms. Claudine Land, who is business strategist and owner of Virtual Ingenuity, LLC. Virtual Ingenuity, LLC, since their conception, they have provided professional consulting services to clients across the zones from customized planning to innovative solutions. Her focus is always to build a genuine results-driven strategy for business success. Virtual Integrity, LLC provides-

Kayla Briggs:
Ingenuity.

Martin Briggs:

Excuse me. Virtual Ingenuity provides optimized strategic planning using customized workflow systems to boost client productivity and growth. Services include business management, content writing, and project management. And of course what she didn't write, which is the main reason we have her here, is her, I've got so many windows I can't see them, is her ability to recruit and to organize strategic plans for business leaders to bring talent into their offices. And so she is definitely going to be addressing the short-term challenges that are in the market for sure. Claudine, how are you doing this morning?

Claudine Land:

I am doing great, Martin. How are you?

Martin Briggs:

Very, very good. Just wanted to hear your friendly voice. And so we always promise business leaders that we're going to get into a devotional. Some of us get so busy on Monday we forget to do a devotional. Andy Blake has promised, and I also could call him Pastor Andy Blake. Are you still a pastor at Gardendale?

Andy Blake:

Yes. We're doing a church plant in Gardendale just north of Birmingham, and we're the strange folks that started in the middle of COVID. So we've been going for about a year now.

Martin Briggs:

That's good. I think it's good to start from there. Well, Mr. Andy, we'd love to get a devotional from you.

Andy Blake:

Okay. Sure. So I'll be real open and honest here. I'm using my sermon from yesterday. So-

Kayla Briggs:

Hey, that's well-prepared.

Andy Blake:

So we started yesterday walking through Philippians, and so this is at the very beginning of Paul's letter to the church at Philippi. And I just want to read a couple verses. And I titled my message yesterday An Anatomy of Christ-Centered Unity, and I think it's such a tremendous message that we need as a city, as a church, as a people. And this anatomy has several parts, and you could probably come over more parts

than I did. But this is the text that I had. I'll read it, and then I'll tell you my anatomy of it, what I pulled out of it.

Andy Blake:

Paul says this, "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all, making my prayer with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. And I'm sure of this, that he who began a good work in you bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to feel this way about you all because I hold you in my heart. For you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my I witness how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. And it is my prayer that your love may have bound more and more with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God."

Andy Blake:

So that was my text yesterday, and this is Paul's introduction. And my anatomy that I came up with, like I said, you may come up with more, was there were four things here. And the first one is this, is that Paul showed, in this Christ-centered unity, the first thing is that Paul expressed deep gratitude for the church at Philippi. And he said it in two ways. He says, I make my prayer with you and thanking for you with joy, which is the Christian concept of joy, which is not based on circumstances, which is so huge.

Andy Blake:

And then the second part of his thanksgiving and gratitude was because of their partnership in the gospel. And I won't go real deep into this, but I know sometimes we think of this, and we say, "Wait a second, Paul. Are you saying you wouldn't be thankful for them if they hadn't sent you this gift?" We read later on in Philippians that they had sent a man named Epaphroditus to bring a gift to him, but that's not what Paul is saying.

Andy Blake:

Paul is saying that their love for Christ and their evidence of what they had done was manifested, was shown through their gift. And so the first thing was he expressed a deep gratitude, but he also grounded this in the work of Christ, not in the work of Paul, not in the work of the church at Philippi, not in the work of Lydia, not in the work of Timothy or anyone else. And he said it like this, "And I'm sure this, that he began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ." And that's so huge in that we tend to focus on what we do. We tend to focus on what someone else does, but our foundation, our whole concept of unity comes in the work of Christ.

Andy Blake:

And then he goes off on a little bit of a tangent for a couple of verses there, but it's a good tangent because what he is expressing is how much he loves the church at Philippi. And I read yesterday, during my sermon, I actually read the love chapter, 1 Corinthians 13. I said, "Hey, if there was any guy that ever knew about love, it was this guy. It was Paul." And he says about them, he says, "I hold you in my heart, and I yearn for you with the affection of Christ." So in this anatomy of unity that we want and desire, we need, and although we're seeing all these things pulling us in different directions, there's gratitude, there's a foundation in the work of Christ, there is a deep love.

Andy Blake:

But then the last thing was prayer. Paul said this prayer, and his prayer is so beyond and above what we normally pray. It's good that we pray for each other's physical needs. It's good that we know someone that's not feeling well, that's ill, we pray for them. Yes. Yes, we do those things. But his prayer is full of requests for their love to abound, for their knowledge and discernment to multiply, that they will be pure and blameless. And then the last one, full of the fruit of righteousness and all to the glory of God.

Andy Blake:

And so, for me, this was a huge introduction, and I think something that we really need to keep in mind as far as the price that our unity is something that we're striving for. I see around us. We see it all the time. It seems like we're being pulled in 1,000 different directions, and maybe even our culture wants to divide us. But there is an anatomy. There is a way, and it comes through these things. It's deep gratitude. It's the foundation in Christ. It's the love. And it's the prayer for each other.

Kayla Briggs:

That's great.

Martin Briggs:

Beautiful. Moving forward, can't go along with it.

Kayla Briggs:

That's right.

Martin Briggs:

And I love that joy from your innermost man. Like you said, your joy can't be driven-

Kayla Briggs:

It's not happiness.

Martin Briggs:

Right.

Kayla Briggs:

Right. It's not happiness. Joy is a totally different thing.

Martin Briggs:

That's beautiful.

Andy Blake:

It's interesting. Paul uses the word joy or rejoice over 12 times in this book. That was one of the main, overarching themes of this letter to the church at Philippi.

Martin Briggs:

Love that. I also appreciate you mentioning unity. It was funny, our guest, I think it was last week, we had Jonathan on.

Kayla Briggs:

Yeah, we had Jonathan.

Martin Briggs:

And he felt led to talk about unity as well in his devotional. So praise God.

Kayla Briggs:

Yeah, I realize the Holy Spirit must be doing something.

Martin Briggs:

Yes. To tackle this issue about workforce development and retention, it will require unity. Anyway, would you lead us in prayer, sir?

Andy Blake:

Yeah, sure. Father, we thank you for today. We thank you for all that you've done for us this week. We thank you for a new week. We know that your mercies are new each morning. We thank you for this letter from Paul to the church at Philippi that you have preserved for us for over 2,000 years, Father. And we pray that we will apply these words, not just be hearers but doers as well. And Father, we give this time over to you, and Father, we pray that you will draw us together to come up with solutions to problems, to identify problems, come up with those solutions, Father, and to follow you and not just for physical and for economic stability, Father, but for your glory in our city. In Christ's name. Amen.

Martin Briggs:

Amen. Praise God. All right, here we go. So again, we're going to do this call in four parts. Really it was five. We had the devotional. We're going to talk about the problem first. Why is this such a big, big deal? And I hope that you'll share this message with your pastors, nonprofits, because the greatest thing that nonprofits, your churches, schools, academia can do for the business community, because so much of society relies on the business community for funding, et cetera, et cetera. And everybody's taking a lot from business leaders, but what can churches and nonprofits give back to business owners and executives? And hands down, from my perspective, the greatest thing that if somebody wants to help business leaders with, it would be using their influence to help send talent into the workforce and make it easy for business owners and business leaders to identify talent that they can hire.

Martin Briggs:

And supposedly, if we're lifting up disciples out of the church, the greatest laborers should be coming out of the church community. So with that being said, let's shape up some of these challenges that we have in Birmingham. Essentially, let's talk about the unemployment rate. The unemployment rate, as it stands exactly really in April, what's interesting is a healthy unemployment rate is typically between four and 5%. If you don't know what unemployment rate is, it's based the amount of people who are out there looking for a job that can't find a job. That's it in a nutshell. We're at four or 5%. Birmingham, when you look at the large metropolitan areas, Birmingham, a lot of us don't know this, we're number one with the lowest unemployment of any large city in America. There are almost 60 cities or

metropolitan areas that have over a million people. We are number one at an unemployment rate of 2.7% as of April 2021.

Martin Briggs:

The second one is actually Salt Lake City at 2.9%. And really if you look at all cities across America, Alabama is just doing very, very well as a whole. That would be according to that right here, according to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics. I will say, oh, well, that sounds good, and we always celebrate a very, very good and low unemployment. For employees, it's wonderful. It's amazing for an employee because they have so many options they can go for. However, for the employer, it's a nightmare. It truly is. By and large, a very, very, very low unemployment will increase cost hands down. It increased cost for the consumer. It increased cost for the employer. The employer works very, very hard in that kind of climate. So I'm not complaining about it. It's a good thing.

Kayla Briggs:

And it's rare for us to be number one in something that's seen positively, unfortunately, across the country.

Martin Briggs:

It's a good challenge. I really love it. The last thing I'll bring up is the World Games is coming a year from next month, July 7th, I believe.

Kayla Briggs:

I think 7th through the 17th, if I'm not mistaken.

Martin Briggs:

And over many, many years, Kayla is always bright. She loves the sports. She loves Olympics and she's always told me ... I've known this nice lady since we were in high school back in 19 ... I don't know.

Kayla Briggs:

Oh, gosh. He always wants me to whip out a date [crosstalk 00:20:19].

Martin Briggs:

1995. So I met her when the Olympics came to Atlanta. Tell everybody what you've always said about the Olympics and the impact that it had on Atlanta when that happened.

Kayla Briggs:

Well, I'll just say I have family in Alabama, and so I was no stranger to this region growing up. But going to Atlanta to visit, I often felt that the city was charming, and it had its own character for sure. And I know we have some people on the call that are from that area that can probably speak to this even better than I. But after the Olympics came, there was a drastic shift, almost immediately really. I don't feel like it was something that took a long time to notice. There are just people that come to games that don't leave. They may come there because they're helping to set up, and they discover that it's a nice city, a nice place to live. They may find some other kind of opportunity that keeps them there. They may go home and actually shore some things up and then come back later.

Kayla Briggs:

There's just a variety of people that wouldn't otherwise see a city or see the opportunities in a place if it hadn't been for the games. And so what you find, as we all know now, Atlanta is a major metropolitan area that is extremely diverse in a variety of ways. I think we tend to think of diversity in just a couple of cross-sections, but there are so many people from so many places. There are a variety of languages spoken. There is all kinds of commerce there that wasn't there prior to the Olympics. And I don't think anyone would debate that that had a large part to play, that the Olympics had a large part to play in changing the landscape of that city.

Martin Briggs:

Exactly. And to back that up with some more interesting statistics, one particular article I found online, "How did the Olympics impact Atlanta? The games contributed to making Atlanta the business capital of the Southeast. Boasting 18 Fortune 500 companies, Atlanta experienced new growth after the game with more corporations and talented people moving to the area. Successfully hosting the Olympic games brought international attention to the city of Atlanta." It was a major, major impact. And so hopefully it'll bring more talent, for sure, but there is a wave of more growth for Birmingham ahead. The World Games will make a major impact, for sure. The last thing I'll say about ... Well, Andy, from your perspective, we're on our soapbox. Get on your soapbox.

Andy Blake:

Yeah. Well, let me piggyback a little bit-

Kayla Briggs:

Climb on up there.

Andy Blake:

Let me piggyback a little bit on the unemployment rate. I know you were looking at Birmingham specifically, but I'm going to talk for just a second about Alabama. I think, when we talk about unemployment rates, it's a little bit deceptive, in that the way the Alabama Department of Labor and the US Department of Labor defines unemployment. Because they have this other statistic, and it's called the Alabama Labor or the labor force participation rate. And the way it's defined is if a person has not worked in the last 30 days or has not looked for work in the last 30 days, when the person has done those two things in the last 30 days, they count towards the unemployment rate. If they do not, they're considered as not participating in the employment process or the labor force participation.

Andy Blake:

And if you look at across the United States, and I'm looking at my stats here that I got from the Alabama Department of Labor, the US labor force participation rate is 61.5%, which is pretty alarming when you think about that, thinking of that definition. So in other words, almost 40%, 39% of people ... And they define it as someone that's 16. I don't remember the end age, but 16 and the end age, almost 40% are not participating across the United States.

Andy Blake:

Now, when we think about that, wow, that's bad for the US. But Alabama's rate is 57.1. And so it's even lower than the national rate. And the most current statistics that we have now is April, like you just

mentioned, we don't have May yet. But in my work daily, I see this every day. And then you guys, as business leaders and ladies as business leaders, you probably see the same thing. I told multiple people, right now is the least motivated workforce that we have.

Kayla Briggs:

That's true.

Andy Blake:

And it is a challenge, and I know that it's a challenge for you as business leaders. It's a challenge for me as a nonprofit workforce development leader, because many of the people that come through our program, they're there to check boxes, or they don't really want to go to work. And it's interesting. In my working with the city and the Second chance hiring event, the city has even recognized this. And they said, "Hey, this extra unemployment and these stimulus checks, this had a adverse effect." And so it's really dramatically impacted. And so when you're reading through the Birmingham Business Journal, I'd say a year-and-a-half ago, pre-COVID, these places wouldn't have those problems. It's not necessarily because of the virus itself. It's more about-

Kayla Briggs:

How we've navigated the challenges.

Andy Blake:

Yes. And so for me, whenever you read the unemployment rate, now here again, this is not Birmingham, this is Alabama. When we look at the unemployment rate, we have to be really thinking of that participation rate. That's alarming, that in the State of Alabama over 40% of eligible people for the workforce are not involved.

Martin Briggs:

You mean over 50% in Alabama are not involved where the national was 40%.

Andy Blake:

Right. It's 57.1% is the-

Martin Briggs:

Are not involved.

Andy Blake:

Are involved.

Martin Briggs:

Are involved, okay.

Andy Blake:

43% are not, and the US figure is 61.5. So 39 or 38-and-a-half is. And here again, understandably there are those among us who can't work for certain reasons, mental health reasons, different factors like that, but that's nowhere near 40% of our population.

Kayla Briggs:

No, no.

Andy Blake:

So that's my soapbox.

Martin Briggs:

Well, we're going to move on to actual, tangible solutions that a business leader can use on a Tuesday, I love that quote, on how you can actually grow your business given the climate of employment.

Martin Briggs:

And I also, as we conclude on just the challenges, everywhere I go, I'm always with business leaders. That's who I spend most of my time with. And I ask every business leader the same question every time. What is it that you need to maintain your current business or grow it? What is the greatest restriction to your ability to maintain your current market position or to grow your business? And nine times out of 10, I'm saying that conservatively, I'd like to say 10 times out of 10, but nine times out of 10, it is a personnel issue. They need another business partner. They need another person to help lead the executive team. They need someone else who can duplicate what they are doing. They need another strategic partner or more employees, more technicians, more, more, more. It's always a person, somebody that they can hire.

Martin Briggs:

And so hands down, this is the greatest challenge facing. Because if the business leaders are not able to maintain or grow, that stifles everything else. That stifles giving back to your church, back to your nonprofits, because of all those types of things. It also stops thought process because the business leader is so involved with the day-to-day transactions of their because they don't have enough help that they can't think about how to grow their actual company. They're just trying to maintain.

Kayla Briggs:

Or they may even have a system in place, but they can't work whatever that system is.

Martin Briggs:

Trying work it. Exactly. Well, with that being said, I think we've complained enough about the challenges. Now we're going to move into the direct solutions. Let's just say there was no long-term planning. What is available right now for a business leader that wants to grow? And certainly I want to bring up our friend, Claudine Land. We already gave you her introduction. Claudine, how are you doing today?

Claudine Land:

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

Martin Briggs:

Well, very, very good. We're glad you are here. And so, Claudine, I know I gave a little bit of a bio, but would you like to just tell us a little bit more about yourself and what your organization does?

Claudine Land:

Sure. Virtual Ingenuity, LLC, we're actually in Trussville, Alabama, and I work across time zones with companies throughout the world to provide support, business support services, just services that's going to increase a business's workflow systems and create innovative solutions for their success and for their goals. We build results-driven strategies, and they're customized for each business. We work together. We just build relationships to reach their goals, to boost productivity, increase growth. Whatever their goals are to boost their productivity, that's what we assist with. Whether it's content writing for websites, whether it's recruiting talent, which is so needed right now, or other business management services. That's what we provide.

Claudine Land:

And I think, looking at, Martin, just what you all were saying, it's really, really important in recruitment to look for someone with longevity. How long has the candidate served in that position? And what I'm seeing right now is that candidates are just jumping from position to position. And at the end of the day, to me, when I look for talent, I don't necessarily look for, you have to be in a position for 21 years or 10 years. What I really look for is, in the short time that you've been with a company, what impact have you made on that company?

Claudine Land:

I also look for folks that have wonderful management skills because you may have a great candidate, but not everyone's a manager. So what are you going to bring to the table? And how do you adapt to change? In business no two days are going to be the same. So how does that candidate handle change? And I know that COVID has affected a lot of businesses, but those are just some of the three main things that I've helped you all with in finding talent for those positions that you've needed them. Referrals is also a great source to find talent, and building those relationships is great for referrals.

Martin Briggs:

Very true. And everything that Claudine said is true. Kayla and I have utilized ... Claudine, how long have we been partnering with you? At least year-and-a-half, two years, it feels like.

Claudine Land:

About two years now. Yeah.

Martin Briggs:

It's been two years. It's been amazing. And so really as a whole, there are what I would call fractional executives to assist you. Fractional executives, these are people who have the mind and the bandwidth of an executive or a leader who says, "Okay, rather than me joining a company and being a part of the senior team or the executive team, I'll open up my own operations and will fractionally serve a small business or a company or whatever it is." Because it's very expensive. If we took Claudine actually on staff, that would blow up our budget. But we're able to fractionally hire Claudine to help us with our

strategic needs, our ability to grow and think at a high level without having to actually bring her on board.

Martin Briggs:

And certainly the biggest thing that she's done for us is not only help us to recruit talent, but to help us formalize our thoughts about what type of talent we're looking for, helping us to write job descriptions, list the job descriptions. Those are things that are very time consuming, but Claudine has the bandwidth to do that. So if you're looking to grow, you're trying to find business leaders to help you in your business, certainly I would talk to Claudine Land for sure of Virtual Ingenuity, LLC.

Martin Briggs:

So with that, let me ask you this too, Claudine. What are some of the tools the recruiting tools, online tools? What do you think are some of the go-to places to fish for candidates?

Claudine Land:

I think right now, aside from my own personal arsenal of folks that I go to, LinkedIn is great. LinkedIn, it's just a wonderful tool that I have really found to be successful. There are also certain agencies that you can use that I personally use. I've got my connections there with various agencies, depending on the company and what their needs are, what their focus is. Whether it's healthcare, if it's in media, it really just depends, Martin, on what the needs are for that company.

Claudine Land:

For me too, referrals are awesome. I usually establish great relationships with the candidates that I hire for my clients. And so oftentimes they refer me to someone that they may know. And like I said, Virtual Ingenuity is all about building relationships, and it's so, so important, and it really does help a lot with referrals as well. So those are some of the sources that have really helped me in recruiting.

Martin Briggs:

That's good. Good. Andy Blake, do you have any stuff you've heard of in the market?

Andy Blake:

Yeah. So let me bring this up. And this is with shortage in labor, I know that a lot of employers have changed. They've altered their requirements and their minimums and things like that. And one of the things that we've done at Work Faith is we have intentionally worked, over the past two or three years, with an untapped source of labor, and that's Second Chance job seekers. And I know that this is scary for some employers. It's a little bit uncertain, but what we have seen time and time again, that these are some of the most motivated employers in Birmingham-

Kayla Briggs:

Employees.

Andy Blake:

... or employees in Birmingham. As a matter of fact, we've actually done several Second Chance hiring events, and the district attorney, Danny Carr, was one of the main sponsors, but also the City of Birmingham and Prison Fellowship was also part of the market. And the first one we had, we had over

500 people at the Boutwell. Now this was pre-COVID, and we actually had one in May, another one. Now our numbers were drastically down because of COVID, but the impact was huge. We had about 120, roughly, job seekers, and the number of jobs that we've already found out that came out of that for Second Chance job seekers was somewhere around 70. I don't have the number right in front of me, but it was 63%.

Kayla Briggs:

That's great.

Andy Blake:

And so thinking through people that, like Claudette was just talking about, the people that are loyal, and they want to work and are motivated, these are a group of folks that are motivated, and they want to get to work. So I know, like I said, this is a level of uncomfortableness for a lot of folks. But I think that if we were to expand business leaders, they would expand into this market more. I think they would be pleasantly surprised, and I think that they would not only just for their business, but the service that it gives back to our community is huge. Because you can imagine someone coming out of incarceration, that's something that they have to have-

Kayla Briggs:

Yeah, that's true.

Andy Blake:

... to be a productive member of our society, to reenter society. So a real, how do I do something about this now? This is an untapped market. And I'll say this. We're actually having another event in September. We're having another Second Chance hiring event in September, and I'm sure Martin will publicize it for me as well. But you can contact me as well. Or like I said, Jeremy Miller is part of the Prison Fellowship, who is also a ULECx Market partner. You contact either one of us for details about that. So we need business leaders that say, "Hey, we want to hire someone. And we will show up to this Second Chance hiring event, and we will interview them on the spot." It'll be at the Boutwell again, and I think it's a tremendous opportunity for us.

Martin Briggs:

Wow. Yes. And you get a mixed bag there, right? When you're talking about Second Chance, you have people with varying career backgrounds. You have high professionals, people with degrees, technical people. And there's a great value there, because it takes a lot of trust, not only on the employer, but the employee. It's a tough conversation. To talk about your background, you just don't want to have that conversation a lot. So once an employee like that gets locked into an employer that they trust, in my mind, they're going to probably be a little bit more loyal because of the care that's been given to a sensitive hire. So that is an amazing, good thing.

Kayla Briggs:

And I think, no matter who you're hiring, there is a certain amount of time and investment that has to happen on the front end as an employer. So it doesn't mean that you have ... I think there can be possibly a stigma attached that this relationship is somehow going to take more effort or take more work, and that's not necessarily the case. So again, I think a lot of us have pivoted during this time.

That's been the word of the day for probably over 365 days now. But I think as we continue to navigate challenges, we're going to continue to need to figure out new ways to do things. And so hopefully people are starting to open their minds a little bit towards new efforts.

Andy Blake:

And there are tax incentives for hiring-

Kayla Briggs:

That's true.

Andy Blake:

... Second Chance folks as well. Just throwing that out there because I know it's expensive to recruit and train a new employee. I know it's very expensive.

Martin Briggs:

It can be very expensive.

Claudine Land:

Kayla, I have to say that businesses need to look at what's going to attract workers. What's going to attract someone to come to work for your company? Things are shifting right now. And I think that instead of it, doesn't take more effort, companies just need to be more creative. It's a different time now. So this to me is a creative time for employers to get creative. What's going to attract candidates now? The world [crosstalk 00:40:31] ... Martin, you said that the World Games are coming. It's time for companies to get out there and find a creative way to attract employees.

Martin Briggs:

Very, very, very true.

Claudine Land:

It doesn't have to be time-consuming. It's just finding that creative team that's going to help you, which is what Virtual Ingenuity, LLC does.

Kayla Briggs:

Couldn't agree more, Claudine. Couldn't agree more.

Martin Briggs:

Something that Kayla and I [crosstalk 00:40:58]. Go ahead, Matt.

Matt:

Yeah. So I think that one of the most important things that employers have to do at this point is they've got to figure out how they're adding value to people. And so when you're looking for employees, you've got to know, what value am I going to add to this person? For me, we're a dime a dozen. Literally there's another advisor two offices down. There are other advisors in my building. And so for us, it's constantly, how are we going to add value to an employee? We've added three members to our team over the last

year, and so that is important. But at the same time, as an employee, that person's got to think about how I'm going to add value to an organization.

Matt:

One of the biggest topics that continues to be talked about is a living wage or what type of compensation somebody should receive when they're coming on board. And to add to some of the numbers that y'all were talking about earlier, this was an article or an email that I got this morning, and this is from Axios on June 16th. "More than four in 10 workers say they're considering leaving their jobs and a record four million people quit their jobs in April." So this is nationwide.

Matt:

And then a similar article from Axios on June 13th says that the lowest wage that workers without a college degree would be willing to accept for a new job now stands at \$61,483, a rise of \$10,000 in just one year. So I think that what's important is we do have a low unemployment rate here in Birmingham, but I think that nationwide a conversation that needs to be had with people in general and where society as a whole is doing employees and employers a disservice is they're telling people that they ought to be compensated when they're not necessarily adding value.

Matt:

So \$61,000 for someone without a college degree is unrealistic in most expectations. And there's this thing called automation and technology. And a lot of these employees, these jobs are going to get eliminated in fast food restaurants. China has already got fully-automated restaurants where there are no employees. It's all robots. And that is one thing that people need to continue to consider. If you can add value in an organization, then that's a win-win situation for employer and employee.

Matt:

A job is needed. A job is created. But as we continue to, as a society as a whole, tell people that they deserve more income when they're not necessarily providing a higher level of value, that's doing a disservice to those people long-term because those jobs will be eliminated eventually. Artificial intelligence, new technologies, business owners continue to innovate. They will get creative. They will find solutions to problems. And unfortunately I think that some of these positions that are available now, they won't necessarily be available in the future if this trend continues.

Martin Briggs:

Very good point. You're absolutely right. Automation is going to be a big part of it. And I think that you're going to see ... We all thought that even by now automation would soften the rate of people being able to find jobs. As of right now, it has not slowed things down at all. To wrap up our areas of direct solutions that you can do right now, some other recommendations for business owners. And again, Kayla and I have led, as business owners for 15 years with internal staff of about five, we've got about, I don't know, 300 employees in the field, if you will. And so we know a little bit about hiring people internally.

Martin Briggs:

One of the most effective things that you can do as a business leader is to know what you're good at and know what you're not good at, or the things that you should be doing or shouldn't be doing. Have a lot

of discernment. Some of the things that you are doing as a business leader, you need to stop doing. For example, accounting is something that you should not be doing. Bookkeeping is a waste of time. You can get people to help you with your bookkeeping at a fractional cost, but a lot of people have a hard time, that was me for many years, relinquishing doing your bookkeeping and other accounting. Those things take a lot of time with very little return.

Martin Briggs:

Also, personal errands essentially. A lot of growth stuff, sales, working with your customers, a lot of stuff you have to do on your own to make that happen, but personal things that you're doing should probably stop. For example, this morning, I had to take a tuxedo back to Mr. Burch Tuxedo over the weekend. Now that's going to be about a 25, 30 minute drive for me to go over there, back over. I brought that to work with me this morning and gave it to one of my associates and told her that it had to be turned into them by 4:00 today.

Martin Briggs:

I don't make bank deposits anymore. I do very, very few personal things. Grocery shopping, I don't do that anymore. There's a lot. And it's cheap to delegate those types of things. A lot of the stuff that we need as business owners and business leaders, it would take somebody who's making 40 to 50 to \$60 an hour to do those types of things. But some of the stuff that you're doing is a 10 to \$20, \$15 an hour type of deal. And so it's better to trade those things out so that you can do bigger things that make a little bit more cash.

Martin Briggs:

Another thing is it is better to pay one person more money than to hire a whole bunch of people. One great person who's in the right chair with the right heart, loves what they're doing and is good at it will outwork. And this is done, statistically. I actually heard this at the conference.

Kayla Briggs:

Yeah, this is definitely true.

Martin Briggs:

They will work seven times greater and harder than anyone else. It's better to work on two or three great people who get along and are great at what they do, totally very well paid, as to hiring more people with the same budget. Great people who make a lot more money are going to get a greater return and bring more peace to the organization for sure. Pay high, pay fewer people, and you'll get a lot done.

Kayla Briggs:

That really speaks to the idea. I don't know people don't like to hear it, but the majority of our population, the majority of people are actually not multi-taskers. You think you're getting more done, but you're not really getting more done. And so it's a similar thing when you're hiring. If you're creating a situation where you have a large volume of people that you've hired, but you haven't really sifted through to figure out the true talent among the group.

Kayla Briggs:

And again, having the right person in the right seat makes all the difference. If they're passionate about what they're doing and find really a dignity or a satisfaction in work, and then you honor them by compensating them more than fairly, there is a devotion and there is a different kind of relationship that happens. So we're very big on culture around here, and so yeah, it's just so important to take that point to heart.

Martin Briggs:

Very true. Just now-

Kayla Briggs:

Get very good people.

Martin Briggs:

Just now starting to learn that in 15 years. So we're ready to go.

Andy Blake:

Some of my best money that I spend every month is to my bookkeeper.

Kayla Briggs:

I believe it.

Martin Briggs:

Payroll, stop doing payroll.

Claudine Land:

Martin, you hit the nail on the head right there. A lot of the business owners that I talk to and I consult with them, the first thing I tell them, once they tell me what their goals are, I look at what they're doing, and they're wasting so much time doing the little things, the mundane things. I tell them outsource, outsource, outsource. You can cut your cost by up to 60% by outsourcing services. Only focus on what you are good at. The things that you're not good at, outsource those to a great company. And you'll cut your cost. It's simple, but there are people that have trouble letting go. But once they do, they reap the benefits.

Martin Briggs:

Very true. Very, very, very true and very impactful to make that decision. It will save you a lot of money. So now we're going to go to the third of the fourth part of the call. We're going to talk about some of the long-term things that are being worked on in the market to release more candidates into the market. I'd love to start with really Andy because Andy is really working on the long-term strategic plan from a faith and business perspective in Birmingham, working with churches and nonprofits and business leaders, tying those things together to create a system. Can you tell us a bit more about that, Andy, what's coming?

Andy Blake:

Yeah, sure. So Martin and Kayla and myself were involved in a seminar a couple months ago with a well-respected organization out of Chicago, and really intrigued by the model that they have. Because they have combined elements of the nonprofit world that we already have in existence here in Birmingham, which is people like my organization, Work Faith Birmingham, where we do a two-week workforce development piece for people that are really ready for the marketplace. They just need that extra little push.

Andy Blake:

And then there was another element of this that was more involved for people that needed a little more help, and there's a time factor there as well. And so just looking through that, there was a training, if you will, piece of it, but there was also a transitional employment piece. And they had a circle graph, and the top part was the training part, and the bottom part was the transitional employment pieces. So the transitional employment pieces for them was a staffing agency, plus also they had contracts with various cities to do things like shoveling snow and cleaning up graffiti and things like that. And these were understood to be here's the key transitional employment opportunities.

Andy Blake:

And Martin, you brought this up many times, and I think it's so key. The transitional employment opportunities were not 100% work. They were 60% work, and the other 40% of their time they were working on these other ... This was not a faith-based organization, so they called them things like life skills and things like that. But the idea is to produce a person at the end of the period, whatever development stage that person needs, and it's different for every person. But when they come out of that, you have a person that is prepared for the marketplace, and they are in a position to succeed in the marketplace.

Andy Blake:

And another piece that we saw on there came from another organization outside of Care, and that was a group in Detroit that their piece of transitional employment was they were taking coats and making them into sleeping bags. They would transition from coat to sleeping bag for the homeless people in Detroit. And these were being manufactured by the homeless people. It's a cool thing, so everybody wants to have a coat like this now. But for a number of reasons, one of the main reasons people know that when they buy this, all the proceeds go back into the community to help employ these folks.

Andy Blake:

And so, as we were going through that process together, the three of us were going through this together, I began thinking about it. You know what? We already have lots of these pieces, and they're sitting over in the corner, and we just need to assemble them. And so we've begun the process of assembling those things, and it's pretty exciting, but the thought process is similar to that. But we want to add the faith-based component, and the key, in my mind, is discipleship. Of course, to the secular world, we would call that mentorship.

Andy Blake:

And so the process, we're still working through that, is that a person will come through one of our nonprofit organizations that are partnering with us. And they will do an assessment, and they will be assigned a ... I believe Charlie Haynes is the creator of this. He calls this a mentor for advice. So basically a person is assessed in a certain career field, and they are assigned a mentor in that career field. And

that will help them on a number of levels, obviously for vocation wise, but also for being able to network them with people in that career.

Andy Blake:

And so just thinking through those pieces and trying to develop those pieces, we're in really the opening stages of this. And we actually did a small pilot of that. And we got together back in, was it March?

Kayla Briggs:

Yeah.

Andy Blake:

And I said, "Martin, what do you need for us to make this work?" And he said, "I need people." And so we've actually sent about seven or eight people through this program. And as you guys saw, if you're of the market partners, you saw we sent out an email with their resume and with their career assessment profile that came out of that. And these people, if you're looking for employees, these are some quality, quality people. There are several of them that I'm just so excited about what's going to happen with them. I'm excited for them, but I'm also excited for you as business leaders. If you were lucky enough to get a couple of these, you would be very, very pleased, I'm just saying.

Andy Blake:

I know this, and I've been with Work Faith Birmingham for a while now, and I've seen multiple people, and these are some folks you can really get excited about. So we are defining that process going forward and thinking through the social enterprise, if you will, like the sleeping bag and coat thing, but some of the pieces are already laying there, and they just need to be assembled.

Kayla Briggs:

Yeah. That's the beauty, I think, of our region and I think the passion that people already have to give back in meaningful ways. And so I think that was probably the most exciting thing that we could almost immediately see. We have the parts. We have the parts. So I'm so thankful that Andy is at the forefront of putting it all together.

Martin Briggs:

Yeah, we're very excited about it. We at the ULECx Market, there's five needs that we serve for business leaders. We're servants to business leaders. And I go through all the five needs that business leaders have, but hands down, the number one thing that we need to solve, not just for Birmingham, but at the ULECx Market, is creating a sustainable workflow for business leaders to be able to tap into a pipeline of candidates so that they can hire leaders and business people to hire in their organizations.

Martin Briggs:

The ULECx Market is flush with cash for that potential thing, but we are short leadership to drive it, obviously Andy being one of them, and we're basically waiting for a vision, waiting for a moment in which we feel God saying, "Yes, this is something that you're going to do well and you can make an investment in." And so certainly we are hoping that we'll be able to work with Andy in those investments, and so that's great.

Martin Briggs:

Well, with that being said, in these last three minutes, we already know the thing we need to lead in the most is prayer. As Andy was saying, I actually tried to take this thing on my own back at one point. It was like, "I'll get involved. I'll start recruiting," and found that very quickly I did not have the capacity or the bandwidth to actually get involved with directly handling candidates. And God smacked me and said, "Hey, you need to be praying where you're working. You need to pray it in." So Claudine, would you just pray for this and just ask the Lord to gift us with the grace of people?

Claudine Land:

Absolutely. Dear Lord, we thank you for this fellowship. We thank you for our sharing of ideas. We thank you, Lord, for bringing everyone together to aid in coming up with creative solutions. And we pray, Lord, that we would always turn to you to guide us, to support us. We pray, Lord, that we would always follow your lead. We know that you are always walking beside us. We pray that, for the Birmingham community, that you would continue to guide us, and that we will honor you, follow you, and rely on you, Lord, and not worry about the mundane things, that we will leave it up to you to support us and guide us and we would follow your lead. We thank you Lord, for all that you've done for us, all the community. And we thank you in advance for what you will do for the Birmingham community and for these faith-based organizations coming together. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Martin Briggs:

Amen. Thank you so much.

Kayla Briggs:

Amen.

Martin Briggs:

I also want to bless-