

Nate: So Shawn, welcome to Illuminate HR.

Shawn: Thank you.

Nate: Before we jump in here, when you first went over to Comcast, I was fascinated to learn about how broad the organization is. I wonder if you might be able to share a little bit with folks about what kind of organization Comcast is, and maybe explain the reach and what you guys are all about.

Shawn: Yeah, absolutely happy to. So Comcast is a global media and technology company, about 184,000 employees. And we're comprised of three primary business units. There's the cable company that most people are familiar with when you say the word Comcast. We offer obviously cable distribution, high speed internet, phone, home automation, wireless.

Shawn: Then we have NBCUniversal, which is our broadcast organization as well as film and cable networks. And as a part of that organization we have the theme parks, which are located throughout the world. Universal Studios Orlando, Florida, and also some international sites. Then most recently we acquired Sky, and that's in the Europe. It's a content and distribution business.

Nate: Wow. Yeah. That's a pretty diverse set of properties there. So over the last several years, you've been there doing amazing things. What's kind of one of the more interesting things that you've gotten involved with there that you wouldn't have been exposed to at maybe a less diverse organization?

Shawn: That's a great question. I would say that it is some of the work that we do around clinic operations. We have clinics at our theme parks that take care of not only our employees, but our guests. And that's one of the really exciting things that I got introduced to.

Shawn: We also do standup clinics for the Olympics every other year for our employees are working Olympics. We have the broadcast rates for U.S television as well as digital, digital properties. And we put a lot of employees on the ground to operate the Olympics and provide a clinic every other year for those employees. If we are doing a Superbowl, if we're doing world cup, something along those lines, we also set up clinics to take care of our employees during those major sporting events.

Nate: Wow. Yeah. That is a very unique wrinkle that I think most HR people are not exposed to. So you and I have both been around for awhile. There's perennial problems that appears in benefits, some of which are trying to keep people healthy, trying to avoid healthcare costs. But one of the things that going back to my early career in 401(k) retirement consulting, one of the things that's always been on the radar is, I guess you'd call it financial wellbeing now, whatever the buzzword is. But ensuring people are able to meet their financial obligations, that they're able to save for retirement, that they're able to meet their day to day needs. I know you have historically anyways, a lot of

passion around this subject and some really interesting and thought provoking stuff that you've worked on around how financial situations or emotional situations tie into health, and how everything is really interconnected. What are you guys doing these days around let's say health meets wealth or financial wellbeing, or whatever iteration that's taken for you?

Shawn: Yeah, happy to share where we're going there. A lot of this comes from my personal experiences. I struggled as someone who was estranged from the family. I had to drop out of school. Not always being housing secure through my post high school and college days. Ultimately finally getting back to school. But through that time, recognizing learning the hard way, how punitive the financial services industry is. That mistakes compound and last for years in this space.

Shawn: So I've always thought about financial health from that perspective. I always thought of it from the perspective of wow, we can talk a lot about retirement, and we can really focus our energy on 401(k) plans and even pension plans while they were still somewhat popular. But the reality is people struggle today meeting their obligations of paying rent, of paying for medications, of taking care of their kids, having enough food on the table.

Shawn: And the challenge that most people face is not whether or not they're going to have enough money for retirement. It's whether or not they're going to make it through the week. And I lived that. So we have thought about financial health in a very different way. We said, "Hey, what if we approach this the same way we approach the healthcare industry?" We know the healthcare industry is fragmented, challenging for people to navigate, very difficult to understand. How much something is going to cost, where to go for the right services, etc.

Shawn: Well, financial services are very similar to that. And we said what if we approached this and say, how about we create a financial health assistant? How about if we create a way for people to get help with what they need today? Because if we can solve their problems right now, then we can help them as they need to ultimately focus on things like saving for retirement.

Shawn: So we incubated a company by the name of Brightside through Comcast Ventures. And Brightside operates as a financial services advocate for our employees. It is funded by employers, so an employer would purchase the service. And employees will access it. And everything from solutions on emergency loans, to help dealing with debt, to help dealing with a potential eviction, to help with being housing insecure, to help on provision medications. Providing a series of products that can help the everyday user solve a problem that they have that day.

Shawn: And we think that's important because payday loans are one of the most egregious examples of a punitive program that's out there. You go and you have interest rates around 300%. They're not particularly doing anything to help your credit and you just get into this vicious cycle. If we can provide a product that allows them access to emergency cash at a much lower interest rate because they are a longterm employee,

they have a perfect attendance record, they have accrued vacation on the books, they have an accrued bonus on the books. Suddenly, that changes somebody who is un-loanable or only has access to payday loans. It makes them potentially available for something a lot lower rate and can help solve a problem that they have right then.

Shawn: So the concept behind the company really is how do we help people today, and how do we not get paid by the financial services industry but paid for by employers so that the services provided are without conflict.

Nate: Yeah, that's great. And we see a lot of news. I'm sure you follow all of those stuff probably even more than I do, but we see a lot of politicians talking about erasing student debt or these problems with student debt. We see that I'm talking about the cost of healthcare and for some reason the insurance companies are always vilified. At what point and what can be done or what should be done, what can the average HR person do about what I believe is the fact that healthcare is too expensive. Colleges charge too much to go to a four year university. Are there programs where they can help people figure this stuff out? Are we just band-aiding something and we have to wait for politicians to act? What's happening in those worlds?

Shawn: So I actually think that a lot of the answer is around transparency. We have a healthcare system that has no transparency, right? The payer is typically a third party, either an insurance company or an employer for self insured. Paying for services on behalf of an employee or a plan member.

Shawn: That lack of transparency creates all kinds of opportunities to develop middlemen and people that are making money off of the system. The same thing is the case in financial services. There's not a lot of transparency on how much that loan really costs to write. What is the origination fees? Who's getting that money? So in both of these worlds, it really is about providing guidance. It's about shining a light on here's how much something costs. Think about this in the context of what it is you need, whether that's in the financial industry, or in the healthcare industry.

Shawn: I think that the more transparency we create will help people make better decisions, and ultimately will affect the cost of the industry. I think that as long as we create competition for the quality of services, we will be much better off. I don't know that the government can step in and fix that. I think that's going to take consumer demand.

Nate: Yeah. Consumer demand and a lot of the things that you guys do really, you mentioned Comcast Ventures and investing in new ideas. I think that I've always had a great appreciation for the way you're able to look beyond just your employees and really look at the bigger picture of the problem in society, and how we can be and play a role in fixing some of these issues. So maybe talk to me about that. How important do you believe it is and what other benefits do you have for example, for your employees when you do take that wider view of making an impact on an industry?

Shawn: Yeah, that's a great question. A great way to think about it. One of the things that we've always talked about is employers, and I've had these conversations before, and I'm sure you've had it with other benefits professionals. That employers are really the best chance to drive changes in the healthcare system. And I still firmly believe that's true.

Shawn: One of the things that we are starting to learn I think as employers is that you do have to band together. Not in a purchasing way, but really in a demand for how the system is going to work way.

Shawn: A great example that is around transparency of price. If you look at we did as employers starting really in 2009 by looking at products like Castlight and other organizations that were starting to create transparency tools, we drove a change in a market where now every plan member, whether they're on a fully insured small plan through an employer, whether it's a plan off the exchange or whether it's an employer plan. All these plans have transparency tools right there on their websites. That was something that didn't exist in 2009. So I do continue to believe that as employers, if we band together in demanding change in how services are provided, we can be successful at driving change.

Nate: With the efforts that you guys have, I'm sure you have your finger on the future. And a lot of what you're describing and what you've done is the future or light years ahead of what some smaller companies feel they have access to. But that's why I love your investments in things like Brightside because that really does bring it beyond what a massive organization can achieve on their own, and really start to bring it down to the masses. So you guys have always pushed the envelope, you have pushed the envelope. I know Comcast is an incredibly innovative company in many, many ways, and you're trying to fix big problems that are facing American workers and their families. What else is on the horizon? What do we need to do to take the next step?

Shawn: To me it goes back to how we define health. And one of the things you asked about earlier in terms of how we connect physical, emotional, and financial health together. We have to look at that holistically. I think the last piece of the puzzle is financial health. I think that employers need to focus and understand what the impact is of someone who is struggling financially. What the impact is on their emotional health, and what the impact is on their ability to be productive, and their ability to be effective in their job.

Shawn: Financial health issues are fascinating because there is a level of image and shame that we typically apply to mental health services or mental health issues. I think that feeling of shame and I don't want to people to know I'm struggling or I want to create an image of myself and my self worth. I think the financial piece is much more difficult for people to talk about and address. And it really is something that does drive behavior. Sorry, it is something that really does drive someone's ability to be effective and engaged at work.

Shawn: The amount of time people spend working on the financial issues in the workplace for most studies shows it to be incredibly high. And more time than they spend looking for doctors or looking for healthcare services. So it's an area that is significant for people.

Shawn: So by focusing on financial health and adding it to this three legged stool of physical, emotional, and financial, and bringing that to bring solutions to our employees, I think that is going to be what finally ties everything together.

Nate: So I'm hoping we can switch gears just a little bit if you're up for it, and talk a little bit about careers and HR, and mentoring, and some of those things.

Shawn: Absolutely.

Nate: If we have an HR person who's a young HR professional, they are working for maybe a smaller company, so they're doing everything. What would your advice be to them as far as taking the next step, getting things going in their career in a direction that they want? HR is such a diverse field. What do you typically advise a young person that's coming up in the ranks and wants to enjoy their career?

Shawn: Yeah, so my advice is try everything. I was an HR generalist, and did that for the first seven years of my career. And when Steve [Stein 00:17:38], who was a mentor of mine and my boss at, eventually my boss at Knight Ridder. He reached out and said, "Hey, why don't you come to corporate and do this job as director of benefits?" And I contrive a lot of my success to A, being unencumbered by knowledge. Because I had no idea what I was doing. And B, being given that opportunity and being willing to take a job at a role that I didn't think was going to be very interesting quite frankly. I was like, "Why would I want to do that?" I didn't really know anything about benefits. I hadn't had to do anything.

Shawn: So, and I was at Contra Costa newspapers in California, there was 1,300 employees. I was an HR generalist there and being given this opportunity to go work on something different. What was really powerful for me while I was at the newspaper, however those first seven years was my boss at the time, [Lori Fox 00:18:46] having me rotate and try different things. "Here you need to go work on this part of HR," or, "You need to go work with this part of the company so you can learn." Ask for those opportunities, ask to expand your job. It's not about your job title, it's not about even the size of the company. It is about how you expand your scope by being willing to take on new things. And in doing so, you will maybe find something that really excites you. That's what happened for me for benefits, I found something that I became kind of good at.

Nate: I love that point because you do run into a lot of people in whatever field and industry, that have sort of settled somewhere. And you can tell that they're not really jazzed about it. And I think if you take the approach you're describing of looking around, trying new things, hopefully eventually you find something that you can really be passionate about when you wake up in the morning. And that's a big thing when it comes full circle back to wellbeing and wellness. How happy you are has a direct correlation to what you spend your time doing every day.

Shawn: Yeah, absolutely. I think it is about if you are seeking a career, you go in and you start to master the work that they've given you, and you can create bandwidth for yourself, it's

then when you go ask for more work. That's not when you go ask for a new job or a promotion. It's when you go ask for, "Hey, I've got some bandwidth. Give me something to work on that I can help, and learn, and grow." And that's a really powerful thing for people to do. And it's something that as I have watched people's careers blossom, it's because they've taken that approach.

Nate: Yeah. And the other thing I think that's really prevalent in our industry being just, let's call it wider HR. Is there a ton of opportunity, there's so much room for new thought and new energy. Do you see that a lot, that new thought and new energy like you said, you didn't know what you were doing. But maybe that was a big advantage. Do you see that as maybe a big advantage of people who haven't done things before and bring them in?

Shawn: Absolutely. I think that the HR industry is changing. And not just in benefits, but it's across the industry. There's this expectation now that you know something about the business. And if you of on the business, B-school sensibilities, you're going to be more successful in HR today.

Shawn: The idea that the things that we provide to our employees are products and services. So bringing that fresh thinking has been really huge for people coming into HR as they go, "Wow, why do we have this program, and how do we know the program is working?" It doesn't matter if it's a benefit program, or a training, or development program, right? These are all products, they're all services. How we manage them should be just like we manage products and services for paying customers. And if you do, so if you bring that fresh thinking and you look at these as products and services, you'll see that they need to be changed and refreshed. We all have gone to that training program that was created in 1952, and is still the thing that they offer us to help us succeed. Really, this is 2019. That's not going to really fly anymore. Right? So I think that's really important.

Nate: It has always over my career, been a fascinating time in HR, and just continues to surprise me how fascinating the times are. And now that we've got this layer of amazing technology and people coming in from all over different industries, it really is a cool and fascinating time.

Shawn: Yup. Absolutely.

Nate: Well Shawn, I can't thank you enough for your time today. I really, really appreciate it.

Shawn: Absolutely. Happy to do it.