

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You are listening to Work in Progress. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of WorkingNation. Work in Progress explores the rapidly changing workplace through conversations with innovators, educators and decision makers, people with solutions to today's workforce challenges. Joining today on the Work in Progress podcast is Diego Mariscal, CEO and chief disabled person at 2Gether-International. 2Gether-International connects disabled founders with resources to help the companies grow. Diego, welcome to the podcast.

Diego Mariscal, 2Gether-International CEO:

Thanks for having me. Really excited to be here.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Good to see you again and talk to you again. In the mission statement, you said you wanted to flip the narrative and have people see that disabilities is a competitive advantage for businesses. Explain how you're doing that and why that mission.

Diego Mariscal, 2Gether-International CEO:

I'll start with my own personal story and then that will drive the point across. I was born in the States actually by accident. My parents were shopping. They are both from Mexico and they were shopping for baby stuff. And I was born six months and a half into my mom's pregnancy, pretty tiny baby. My mom jokes and says that I've always been really stubborn even before I was born. I wanted to get out quickly. And as a result of that, I have CP, cerebral palsy.

And to go back to your original question, why do we want to redefine the way people think about disability and sort of flip the narrative? When I was about probably nine or 10, part of physical therapy for me has always been doing a number of exercises from swimming to playing soccer. Believe it or not, I was the goalie so that I could hold on to the goal, to the frame.

And another exercise that we tried was horseback riding because horseback riding helps you with balance, and that was one of the things that my parents wanted me to improve on. And I remember I was on the horse and we were taking lessons and I fell off the horse. I fell off the horse and I was a little thrown off, but then immediately I said, "Okay, let's get back up and let's continue." And for me it was not... I didn't really think twice about it. But then the trainer went up and talked to my parents and said, "This is amazing. I've been coaching for years, and usually when people fall off the horse, they don't want to get back up and it takes a long time for them to get comfortable getting back in the horse." And I share this story because it demonstrates how as disabled people, we have to figure out how to solve problems every day and how to be resilient, creative, and tenacious.

I have fallen thousands of times in my life as a result of CP. And so because of that, falling off a horse wasn't a big deal for me. And so if we can get people to focus on that, on what are the competitive advantages that a disability brings to the table, then the whole conversation around disability changes. And not just the conversation, but also the priority around policy, around programs, around funding starts to shift. And so it's really important that we start to highlight the competitive advantage of disability as opposed to disability just as something that needs to be cured or fixed rather than be celebrated and embraced.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Do you feel like that there has been any progress in awareness in that advantage? Because everything you're saying makes perfect sense to me that you might have had to work a little bit harder at a younger age to solve those problems and that carries with you through your adulthood. So to my question, do you see any progress in people recognizing that?

Diego Mariscal, 2Gether-International CEO:

Some. So the question being, do I see people recognizing disability is a competitive advantage? I think certainly there is a new, I'm going to use quotations, new movement of disability pride and sort of being unapologetically disabled. And so the needle is definitely moving in that direction. I think where we are pioneering and where we are... What we are saying is it's beyond disability pride. It's you're going to succeed as an entrepreneur, not in spite of your disability, but you're going to be a better entrepreneur because of your disability. So we're taking in a step beyond disability pride and identity and saying, you're going to be successful in many ways thanks to your disability. And so I think that we are certainly moving to a place of more accepting and more pride where we still have ways to go and we see it in the entrepreneurship ecosystem for founders with disabilities is the recognition of disability is a competitive advantage for business.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So how is 2Gether working to help those disabled entrepreneurs thrive and get the help they need as a business owner and a small business owner or a big business owner for that matter, get the resources that they need?

Diego Mariscal, 2Gether-International CEO:

Great question. We started off as your traditional accelerator, which looks at 10 weeks of programming, connecting people with mentors, resources and supports to grow their businesses. On the surface, we're just like any other accelerator like Techstars or Y Combinator, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. There's hundreds of accelerators now.

What makes us unique is that we are exclusively focusing on founders with disabilities and this whole conversation around disability is a competitive advantage. And the reason why that is so important is because entrepreneurship resources are often not accessible for founders with disabilities, whether it because they don't have sign language interpreter or they don't have material in braille, et cetera, et cetera. But beyond that, also, sometimes programs don't know how to deal with somebody who might have chronic fatigue and may not be able to participate at the same speed. Mentors are not necessarily properly supported to guide somebody who may have a speech impediment.

And so creating this culture where again, disability is a competitive advantage and everybody involved in the program is seeing it that way helps people not only with their businesses, but also with the way they think about their own disability, which is ultimately the change that we want to make beyond just business and wealth creation. And so I think that's the unique part.

And then I'll just end by saying that even though we started as an accelerator program, it's become clear that 2Gether has become the suite of services that go beyond just accelerating founders with disabilities. And what I mean by that is we're working on a pre-accelerator program to support those companies that are not necessarily ready for an accelerator. And we are also working to establish the first ever fund for founders with disabilities so that it can be these ever evolving ecosystem that supports entrepreneurs at any stage of their journey.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You've been an entrepreneur since you were a teenager. Tell me some of your experiences starting your first company. What did you face? What were some of the challenges?

Diego Mariscal, 2Gether-International CEO:

Oh my God, back to memory lane. What did I face? I've always been relentless. I've always wanted to change the way people think about disability. Even at that early age, I wanted to educate other students about disability. And so, one thing I face and I continue to face, although I'm a lot more comfortable with it now, is a sense of loneliness. And I don't mean necessarily in isolation, but you have to be a little bit crazy to be an entrepreneur, to want to create something that doesn't exist, to want to pull those long hours. I remember being in high school, waking up and the first thing I thought about was Limitless, which was the name of the company that I first created. So the first thing I would think about was Limitless. And the last thing I thought about was Limitless. And now the first thing I think about is 2Gether, and the last thing I think about is 2Gether. I thought everybody is this way. Everybody is obsessed with their job and just wants to make the world a better place. Slowly, I've learned that that is not the case.

And so I think that you asked what are some of the challenges that I face and certainly feeling like an outcast, and I think that's also one of the values that 2Gether has been able to bring. A community of like-minded entrepreneurs that are not just facing the challenges of entrepreneurship, but they're also facing the challenges of being an entrepreneur with a disability. And then the funny story that I can laugh about now, but in the moment wasn't so great was I actually got fired from my first company in Mexico because I've always been really intense and really driven. My leadership style wasn't up to par, so I would drive my teammates a little crazy.

Some of my current team members would argue that maybe I drive them a little crazy now, but I have a lot more experience and a better support system to help me navigate that and it takes a village. But I think the lesson that I took there, which always will carry me forward, is that as much as... I think, for me, entrepreneurship is a creative expression and it's a way to get a little philosophical, here is a way to live the highest truest expression of myself. It is not what defines me. So if for whatever reason I would be fired from 2Gether, the lesson that I took away from my time in Mexico is that I would be fine. The skills and the knowledge and what I have gained from this incredible experience will stay with me regardless of whether or not 2Gether is successful. And frankly, that's part of what we try to impart the entrepreneurs that we want you to succeed as an entrepreneur, but you're going to be better off because you've moved through that journey as opposed to not have taken it at all.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I love that you took that experience of being fired from your own company and turned it around and made it a positive experience, which is a very entrepreneurial thing to do, a successful entrepreneurial thing to do. Is that you take your learned experiences and turn them into a business, you turn them into your way of life. And I also love that it's not your definition of yourself. So I applaud that quite a bit and I think we should all learn from that.

Diego Mariscal, 2Gether-International CEO:

Thank you.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Since I've talked to you, there's a lot of things that have been happening, and I know you're starting a cohort for entrepreneurs with disabilities with Comcast NBCUniversal. Tell me what you're going to be doing with that.

Diego Mariscal, 2Gether-International CEO:

Comcast has been one of our partners for the second year now. I am incredibly grateful for their support. They've really seen... If we're looking at digital divide and inclusion for all, we have to include people with disabilities. And it's something that frankly, not everybody that is working in DNI is looking at in terms of supporting not just entrepreneurs with disabilities, but people with disabilities in general. It's been incredibly transformative to be able to work with them because we're not only supporting 10 to 15 entrepreneurs with disabilities. We're still making the final selection, but it's not just about supporting their businesses, it's also about the story that we're telling through those businesses.

For example, Lache, one of the previous entrepreneurs from last year, she is a performer and she's starting a music business that supports other recording artists. Through the accelerator, she was not only able to grow her company and become one of the premier partners in disability and accessibility for the Grammys, but also was able to work with Comcast in a different area to educate their employee base around disability and best practices in the media space. And so it's this reciprocal relationship where we're getting support from corporations like Comcast to support entrepreneurs with disabilities, but they're also getting to learn about the disability community in a way that... Through leaders that are leading in this space. So it keeps the conversation around disability in a very up-to-date and organic and frankly ever-evolving way that allows corporations to stay ahead of innovation, especially when it comes to disability.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Walk me through what the participants are going to learn and how you are helping them take the next step forward with their company.

Diego Mariscal, 2Gether-International CEO:

We go through the how do you go from one customer to 10? Or if you have 10 customers to 50 or 50 to a hundred, how do you accelerate, granted the term accelerator, how do you accelerate your growth and create reputable systems that allow your company to grow? And so how do you actually create a business model? How do you create landing pages that allow you to scale? How do you talk to your customers in a way that represents a reputable process? Again, these accelerators, and I will throw ourselves in there as well, most accelerators are pretty good about teaching folks the basics of financial customer development, customer discovery, business planning. The basics don't necessarily change. What is unique about us is the way in which we're delivering the service, in a way that is inclusive and accessible of all people that participate, and the community of other like-minded founders that are coming together and like-minded mentors that are wanting to be a part of this movement that we're creating.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Is this a virtual or in-person program?

Diego Mariscal, 2Gether-International CEO:

So this is all virtual, and in the beginning when we first started, we were in person, but COVID really demonstrated that virtual can be a really accessible way of working with folks, and it really allowed us to

scale significantly. I mean, when we did the first cohort, we were working with, I believe it was seven entrepreneurs in the D.C. area. Now we have a network of about more than 600 entrepreneurs worldwide, and we wouldn't be able to have the scale that we have if it wasn't because we are able to service people virtually.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Given that there is still barriers and some challenges and prejudice in the workforce because I've read a lot of things about how it's not just bosses and employers who don't want to hire people. There's coworkers who are concerned about having a coworker with disability in the workforce. So given these challenges, prejudice, would you encourage people with disabilities to start their own businesses?

Diego Mariscal, 2Gether-International CEO:

Oh, absolutely. I wouldn't have the job that I have if I didn't believe that we were uniquely positioned to succeed. What I do want to say to people, and I think this is critical for anybody that is listening. Yes, I firmly believe that disabled people are well positioned to succeed, and yes, we can help you and we can make those introductions and we can create this community. At the end of the day, being an entrepreneur, whether you have a disability or not, it's still really, really hard work. And so I don't want to sugarcoat and say come join our program and we're going to wave a magic wand and all your problems are going to be solved. Absolutely not. I mean, we have a network of 600 entrepreneurs. Out of those more than 600 entrepreneurs, 70 of them have gone through our accelerator program and collectively they raised over \$54 million.

So we are able to create environments that unlock opportunities that we are able to get because of this collective group. But the reality is I'm still working, and I don't want this to sound like a brag, but I'm still working 12-hour days to push this work forward. And so are many other entrepreneurs that are part of our work. And so I don't want to say, "Oh, come join our program and all your problems will be solved." Absolutely not. It's still really hard and difficult work, but we as disabled people have been doing hard and difficult work all our lives. Why not utilize that skillset to do incredible things?

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Diego, what a pleasure to talk to you again. Really great information and love the work you're doing. I love just your whole go-get-them attitude about it and realistic attitude that it's hard work no matter what.

Diego Mariscal, 2Gether-International CEO:

Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. The measurement that I take if I'm enjoying what we're doing and if we're moving in the right direction is that every day I wake up and I feel like it's Christmas. I'm excited to get up and do the work. And it's not that there's no hard days, of course there are, but at the end of the day, knowing that we're making a difference in the lives of countless people with disabilities and the world makes all those hard days worth it, I think.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Thank you, Diego.

Diego Mariscal, 2Gether-International CEO:

Thank you for having me.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I've been speaking with Diego Mariscal, CEO and chief disabled person at 2Gether-International. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of WorkingNation. Thank you for listening.