



Episode 8 – Stride – Noah – v1 2

[MUSIC PLAYING]

NOAH LANG: We really uncovered a larger need, which is to deliver a complete benefits package for people who tend not to be eligible for benefits.

STEVE BLUMENFIELD: Welcome to the Cure for the Common Co., a podcast series looking at innovations in the world of employee health and well-being. Steve Blumenfield and other experts from Willis Towers Watson's Health and Benefits practice are talking to entrepreneurs and industry leaders who break ground to meet the needs of today's workforce and deliver benefit solutions that can separate employers from the pack.

This podcast was recorded remotely with computer equipment, so the sound quality may vary from other pods.

STEVE BLUMENFIELD: Noah, welcome.

NOAH LANG: Thank you, Steve. Pleasure to be here.

STEVE BLUMENFIELD: Welcome, everyone, to another episode of the Cure for the Common Co. podcast. This is Steve Blumenfield from Willis Towers Watson's Health and Benefits. I'm joined today by my colleague, Ashley Doyle. Ashley?

ASHLEY DOYLE: Thanks, Steve. And I'm Ashley Doyle, also from Willis Towers Watson Health and Benefits. And I work with employers to develop health care strategies for their future workforce.

STEVE BLUMENFIELD: Thanks, Ashley. I look forward to a great conversation. We're joined today by Noah Lang, CEO and founder of Stride, a benefits platform for independent workers. Noah, would you please start by telling us a bit about yourself and why you started Stride?

NOAH LANG: I would love to. Thanks so much for having me. I really appreciate it. So my background is not in health care. It's not employee benefits. My background is in consumer product design.

And I started Strive because I was attracted to a particular challenge that I've dealt with, I'm sure, Steve and Ashley, each one of you have dealt with, and probably everyone you're listening has dealt with because it's not really a new one. It just hadn't been solved effectively. And that's, how do I make a smart investment decision in my health care for the coming year?

But I took a different spin on this. I wanted to solve that problem for the people who tend not to get benefits, people who are out there on their own, either because they're independent contractors, they're part-time workers that don't get access to a full suite of benefits, or they're self-employed. And the way the world works is shifting.

I was personally influenced by, frankly, my own family. I've got a sister who's a freelance designer. She has to figure out her own benefits. I've got a father who runs a very small solo practitioner law firm-- he's got to figure out his own benefits-- and a mother who is a realtor. Again, each of them are effectively self-employed and have to tackle a set of problems around our family's financial security that traditionally is solved by a large employer.

So that's what attracted me to the problem of making an effective decision around selecting coverage and doing it for an audience that tends to be underserved. So the [INAUDIBLE] stride was building really a recommendation engine. Think of it like a robo advisor.

STEVE BLUMENFIELD: Got it. That's easy to understand. So tell us exactly how did that work when you launched it.

NOAH LANG: We launched a few years ago with a product that effectively simply collects things like your doctors, your drugs, your illnesses, your family's demographics and financial standing to make that decision for you. Because when you're out there on your own if you're an independent contractor, you're a part-time worker, or you're self-employed, you're not just picking from two or three health plans that an employer may have done a tremendous job, perhaps with the help of Willis Towers Watson, curating for you. You're picking from going uninsured or dozens of plans. And making the wrong decision can have a massive negative impact or positive impact on your family's financial security.

We're probably best known for our early and ongoing partnership with Uber and their population of well over a million independent contractors around the United States. And now I'm pleased to be collaborating with your team on delivering that to some more traditional, quote unquote, "gig work" segments of independent contractors and even part-time workers.

ASHLEY DOYLE: That's a really awesome story, Noah. So you mentioned providing a recommendation engine to the dozens of plans. Can you describe how that works?

NOAH LANG: Certainly. So we built a model that effectively attempts to predict how much care you're going to consume in the coming year. And so we have a large data set of claims and medical expenditure data that allows us to look at a simple slice of who Ashley is today-- age, location, demographic.

We make it very easy to enter your prescription drugs and your frequency of taking those doses, to enter your doctors, to enter your income. And it allows us to triangulate how many care events you may have in the coming year. And then what we do is we price those care events in every health plan that you have available and kick out a recommendation where we show you the best plan based on the lowest total cost of ownership, your health plan premium plus your expected medical costs for the coming year.

And then we apply a few additional filters on that, like the ability to keep your family's doctors, which can be fairly complex if you have a couple of kids like I do. You tend to have a couple of different GPs and a pediatrician that you're trying to maintain. And so we really help give the end user visibility into what the

right financial decision is and then the guide points around some of the softer sides of making this decision, like an affinity for a particular practitioner.

We try to make it a delightful experience even though insurance selection is not always the most delightful thing to do every year and look at scenarios if something changes in your life. We have a lot of drivers, people who drive for a living, on our platform. And so we'll show you what happens if you slam your finger in a car door-- what it's going to cost you in various health plans-- as well as help you to assess more serious chronic conditions and the relative coverage you'll get in each plan available.

STEVE BLUMENFIELD: Yeah. I was trying to maybe net this out in my head and for some of the listeners who might be companies who tend to do this for their people. So you're giving people who really don't have an employer traditionally as we think of it providing benefits for them, delivering up a tool to help them make a decision.

So you're putting that power that they get from working with a large company in their hands. You make this available via the employer. There's many questions that we'll get into on that piece of it. And what's the experience like? Is this something that they do by calling someone? Is it something that they do on their phone? Is it something that they do in front of a computer, all of the above? What's the interface like?

NOAH LANG: That's a great point. So you're right. The people who use Stride tend not to have an HR team or a benefits administrator. They're out there on their own even if they're working for an employer in a part-time or contract manner. And so we really fill that gap, providing the guidance, the coaching, and some basic support. Actually, we go above and beyond more than the basic support to help them throughout the year as they're taking advantage of those benefits.

The experience is largely self-serve. We have a world-class team here in San Francisco and in Austin, Texas. If you need help over the phone, we're there for you to provide that. Most of our users like to start on their own. And so we built a mobile native experience.

You just go to stridehealth.com. You can also start within our app to quickly make this decision, get an assessment and a recommendation on the right coverage for you and your family. And you can complete the entire enrollment from your mobile phone as well. We've built a system that sits on top of the entire individual market. Those are the plans that individuals can select from.

And we've integrated ourselves into the federal exchange, the healthcare.gov. We're one of just a couple of companies who are actually capable and approved to do this, where we can help you assess your eligibility for tax credits to pay for some of those premiums. You can complete the entirety of that eligibility and enrollment on Stride from your mobile device and get access to tax credits that lower your cost of coverage without ever dealing with healthcare.gov, without ever sitting on a government call center. We provide all of that infrastructure and support and, frankly, a world-class consumer experience.

STEVE BLUMENFIELD: Wow, that's fantastic. And it's not just that. As I recall from our prior discussion and know from our work together, you go beyond health benefits as well. So what else do you offer out there?

NOAH LANG: We really uncovered a larger need, which is to deliver a complete benefits package for people who tend not to be eligible for benefits. Today this includes a couple of things you might not

normally think of as benefits. So helping you with your taxes is a huge potential cost savings opportunity for people who are independent contractors. The way you actually track your income and your expenses can dramatically impact your end take-home pay.

So we have two core parts of our platform. One is our expanding set of health benefits. And the other is our expanding set of wealth-related benefits, which tax sits inside of.

So we actually have a mobile native app that you can use every day to track your income as an independent contractor, track your expenses, figure out what you should set aside for your taxes, and then help you start thinking about ways to save. Whether that's putting money into a no-fee checking and savings account or no-fee HSA or starting to think about retirement, we provide that suite of benefits and content and guidance to help you make decisions on your own.

At the same time, our benefits insurance stack has continued to expand as well. So we've built our own dental and vision policies to serve the needs of this workforce with a large carrier-- we are not the insurance carrier-- and continue to expand into accident, disability, and life insurance coverage to really rebuild the suite of things that are plugged into your paycheck when you're a full-time W-2 worker in a large company that you do not get when you're an independent contractor or part-time worker or you're working for yourself.

ASHLEY DOYLE: Yeah. And you really hit the nail on the head mentioning the federal public exchange and then really building off of that for the needs of your independent workers that you're really looking to solve that issue for. So that's really awesome. And I have to stop and ask, how did you come up with Stride's name?

[LAUGHTER]

NOAH LANG: So I think most people would say, Noah, you're a runner. And so clearly that's why you picked the name. I'm sure that impacted my decision. But the real reason was we were looking at getting people through decisions in a smart, fast, efficient way, but decisions that are massively impactful financial decisions.

And the way we think about those decisions is, how do we get you from point A to point B swiftly? We should be doing all the hard work and heavy lifting on the back end. And you as a consumer really should be just getting from point A to point B and then getting on with your life, going back to what you are great at.

And Stride-- if any of you are runners or have been in high school track and field, you've probably done plenty of striders. But striding across the field, getting from point A to point B, staying light on your toes, light on your feet is the consumer experience that we're trying to embody.

ASHLEY DOYLE: And that's really awesome. And so up until here, we've really been talking about the benefit from the employee's perspective or the independent worker. But I'm just wondering from the employer's perspective.

And generally, the employer is looking at this benefits strategy perspective from the traditional employee slash employer relationship. And as they think about the future of their workforce and nontraditional worker types and their responsibility, their role becomes less clear. So can you just provide a couple of comments in terms of what the employer's role looks like when they partner with Stride?

NOAH LANG: Absolutely. And I think probably we should talk for a minute about the role of independent workforces, whether they're contract based or part-time based. We have collaborated together with some large hospitality and retail workforces, where you see up to 80% of the workforce is actually not on the health plan and does not have access to a traditional full set of benefits because they're seasonal, they're part time, or they're independent workforces.

And so you've got an interesting construct even in traditional, quote unquote, "gig work" in hospitality and retail where most of the workforce is locked out of some of the most important financial security opportunities. So as an employer, you've got to be thinking about, even if it's a seasonal workforce, how do I get these folks to come back every single year?

I've trained them up. I may not need them all year. How can I retain them and bring them back year over year? How do I give them the peace of mind and financial security to show up every day and be productive? And those are typically the things that we're trying to unpack for employers.

Think about loyalty, retention, employee NPS, the things are dramatically impacted by the benefits you provide to your full-time workforce. And how do you recreate that kind of relationship for a benefit-ineligible workforce? And if you look ahead 10 years, it's forecast that-- and I firmly believe that about by 2030, which is just a decade away, the majority of the work in the United States will probably be done outside the construct of a traditional employer-employee relationship.

STEVE BLUMENFIELD: So what does that look like from the employer's standpoint? How do they engage with you? What's their role? We all know in the employee benefits world that you have to walk a really careful line to not be in the business of providing benefits for those you shouldn't be and creating an environment in which they would have that expectation that they would have benefits, because then you'll be responsible for those benefits.

And if that's your plan-- you want to provide full benefits-- you can do that. But many companies want to be really, really clear about which side of the line they're on. So how do you approach that to make sure employers know what decision they're making there?

NOAH LANG: Great question. And this landscape will also shift over the next decade. As you see in California, there are new bills, like Assembly Bill 5, which was passed and signed by Governor Newsom, that puts pressure on anyone who uses independent contractors to ensure they're appropriately classified and that they deliver a certain suite of benefits to folks who qualify as employees.

The experience we provide is we make it plug and play and frictionless. And what that means is we do all the hard work and heavy lifting. So look at Stride as delivering the platform you need, a web-based experience, a mobile native app that's best in class. And our marker for success is we want your independent workforce to have an even better experience than a full-time employee.

And for you as the HR team and the ben admin team, we want to make it as hands off as possible so that you don't have to be involved in making those judgment calls on what's delivered. So we deliver this platform. You can pick from a couple different tiers of the platform, which effectively determines the stack of benefits that you're going to offer to your workforce. And we deliver it largely at no cost.

So you get Stride. We deliver health, dental, vision, life, et cetera, those other benefits that I mentioned. We cobrand the experience for you. We give you a plug-and-play set of communications which we'll curate and tailor depending on your audience.

So if you have a retail workforce, we need to engage them in your stores. And we need to engage people face to face. If you have a purely digital workforce, we need to engage them in your app. And we need to engage them over email and by notifications. And so think of us as delivering a plug-and-play platform and communications plan.

And one of the important things in this more fluid workforce is thinking about the onboarding and offboarding friction. We remove that piece of the puzzle. You do not have to offboard folks off of the platform. They can retain access to, say, their own independently purchased health insurance policy even after they have left your workforce. You provide them the guidance while they're there. And then we take care of them after they're gone.

ASHLEY DOYLE: Yeah. And that makes the experience really, really simple having seen this myself in terms of no eligibility files and really no decisions from the employer's perspective, which is of benefit to the employee as well, giving them as many options as available. So outside of the federal exchange, how do you actually decide what goes on your platform?

NOAH LANG: Great question. So for the major medical plans, we have every single policy that's available in the individual market. Because if you live in Orlando versus Tampa, you're going to have a different network. And you're going to have different pharmacies. And you're going to have effectively a very different plan depending on where you're located. And we view it as our responsibility to have a complete marketplace to your independent workforce to make sure they can keep their doctors and they can make the most sound financial decision.

Beyond major medical, we have begun curating our own set of policies. So dental and vision-- one great example. We took a hard look at the market here. And our potential customers were facing issues like waiting periods for their dental policies, facing issues like application fees. We work with carriers to curate the products and, where necessary, curate the benefits and the fee structure so that we're not chipping away at someone's hard-earned income. We're supporting their ability to earn and to protect their income.

STEVE BLUMENFIELD: So let me just tease that part a little bit into the pieces because employers are used to dealing with the group world for the most part. And obviously there's benefits that individuals can buy there. But these are purely individual policies. But you're, in a way, creating a group of sorts.

And this is probably the wrong language to use for insurance terms. But you're able to curate the set of insurance services. And the carriers will do a little more for you because they know you're going to bring an aggregate number of lives to them. They might waive those fees.

But for our clients to be thinking in their heads, which I guess is where you think all the time, it's not the group world. But it's got some similar advantages of that aggregation that enable you to offer some special things to those independent workers that happen to be associated with that employer.

NOAH LANG: That's a very fair take, Steve, which is that in aggregate, as you start to build a very large workforce-- and in this case, we have an aggregate of many of the largest workforces in the world. We

view it as our responsibility and, frankly, tremendous opportunity to use that buying power to save all of them time and money.

ASHLEY DOYLE: And are there any specific types of companies that you're looking to work with? Or you mentioned a bunch of definitions for what you'd consider an independent worker. Are there any minimum thresholds or any targets that you're working towards?

NOAH LANG: Great question. So we tend to work with companies that have a vast majority or a very large portion of their workforce that's independent contractor or part-time W-2. We certainly made a name for ourselves in the digital gig economy working with a number of driving-related workforces, companies like Uber, Postmates, DoorDash, Instacart, as well as organizations that have more specialized workforces.

So you can put companies like TaskRabbit in the digital marketplace space, as well as organizations like Keller Williams that serves nearly 200,000 realtors around the country, very much a more traditional independent contract type of a job. And then we like to work with large part-time workforce audiences-- so national hospitality and retail workforces.

In the past, we have worked mostly with workforces that have over 10,000 independent contractors or part-time workers. But we're starting to expand our ability to serve smaller independent contract and part-time workforces as well.

STEVE BLUMENFIELD: So Noah, you're describing the kinds of companies where this is the best fit and noting that it could be any company with what's happening in the "future of work," as we call it. What have you learned? And what have employers learned that has surprised you and has surprised them for traditional companies that aren't used to working in this way?

It's very different for a company that's a traditional workforce and they're used to the factory floor, for example, than it is for an Uber that kind of grew up in the digital realm. So what have you learned? And what have your clients learned?

NOAH LANG: Yeah. I think that one of the neat things to me is that we had this opportunity to show the traditional-- and you said, factory floor workforce-- a new way based on upstarts like Uber and the opportunity we've had to bring a product to market very quickly in a digital workforce and bring that now to some more traditional, offline workforces.

And so I think that's the first thing that we've had the opportunity to teach the employers that we work with-- is a new model and the opportunity that you can actually start investing and dipping your toe in the water with delivering benefits without having to foot the whole bill, necessarily. And you can have an impact. And a lot of this impact today is felt with just, frankly, affinity and productivity of that workforce.

STEVE BLUMENFIELD: What are some of the things that were like, ooh, gosh, do that differently next time. What were some of the surprises?

NOAH LANG: Well, it's much, much, much harder to engage an offline workforce. I don't know if that's a surprise, necessarily. But we've had to adapt and modify how you get in touch with them and let them know about benefits. They never thought of having benefits from their 18-hour-a-week job before. And so there's a bunch of education to do both for that workforce and, frankly, for the organization.

STEVE BLUMENFIELD: If you worked in a company of the digital economy, they're probably used to interacting with you through an app or some way that they communicate with you today because that's how you get your gigs. Whereas in traditional companies, if you're coming in as an independent worker, you might not have that mechanism. You might not have a ready communication channel.

And certainly HR might not be engaged in the same way. If you're subcontracted through a business unit, you probably don't have the same level of access of back and forth to HR who might be implementing a program like this in many cases as you might expect for a company that they grew up in the digital economy.

ASHLEY DOYLE: Continued question that I do receive from the market-- and this is another technical question because employers-- again, back to their traditional role in designing and executing on these strategies and thinking about cobranding and relaying their workforce over to Stride, it could be a little challenging for them to understand without playing a role. And so one of the questions that they continue to ask is, do you allow for employer subsidies to help offset the coverage if they want to give something back to these workers?

STEVE BLUMENFIELD: Yeah. They're used to that. That's how they operate in the world for most of the workers. Yeah. What is the answer to that one, Noah?

NOAH LANG: Great question. So I would say that's the future. That's not the present. I mentioned some of the bills in California today. You're seeing some other states like Washington start to rethink what the relationship is. And there may be a top-down policy initiative to rethink this of large organizations and small organizations with their independent contract workforce. What's their responsibility to provide certain types of benefits?

So we're seeing, I'd say, some evolution, which may open up the opportunity for more innovation around employers funding traditional benefits for 1099 workers. But today, that generally doesn't happen.

ASHLEY DOYLE: Yeah, yeah. OK. So no for short-term employer subsidies. But talk a little bit about how you connect with any subsidies offered by the government.

NOAH LANG: Great question. So back to our pretty unique integration with healthcare.gov. So we spent the last few years building that with the teams at HHS and CMS, we're effectively able to go tap into the federal tax credits, Advanced Premium Tax Credits, that you can spend. They're advance because you can spend every single month on your coverage. And they net out the costs of premiums to lower than the gross premium cost.

So I'll give you an example. You can come to Stride. We'll verify you are who you say you are, just like you would on healthcare.gov. We will ping on the back end the federal systems, the IRS and the HHS, to verify your eligibility.

So they'll tell us you're eligible for \$100 or \$200 or \$300 a month in a tax credit. And we can net that out of your enrollment right then and there on Stride. And so if you look at a company like Uber, for example, last year, one in three Uber drivers came to Stride and got coverage for less than \$10 a month even though on average their premiums were around \$400 a month.

STEVE BLUMENFIELD: That's just worth repeating. They're paying \$10 a month for coverage that would have cost \$400 a month due to government subsidies they were eligible for and they might not have found without Stride.

NOAH LANG: That's right. And you can go technically get those subsidies on [healthcare.gov](https://www.healthcare.gov). Or in California, it's Covered California. Absolutely. We're there to provide another experience that's curated and tailored to this workforce and to provide both software and a team to support you during that process and after the process.

STEVE BLUMENFIELD: Well, it's also one of the advantages of a company providing this to their independent workers. Because as much as the government or state want to try to communicate and educate and enroll people in this, when a company says, this platform is available to you, in a way that you're expecting to receive from that company, it's just a different point of contact that may encourage a large number of people to actually get coverage.

NOAH LANG: That's right. And then at a federal level, you're seeing a shift towards doing less and less communication and leaving it up to the private sector to drive that communication. So your independent contractors or part-time workers may not be aware it's open enrollment even. We don't have Zach Galifianakis, *Between Two Ferns* talking about open enrollment in [healthcare.gov](https://www.healthcare.gov) anymore.

And so you have to find ways to make sure they don't miss the boat because it's a huge threat to their financial security if they do. And then we can do more. We can play a different role as a private company that's providing guidance. We're not afraid to make a decision with them and back that up throughout the year.

ASHLEY DOYLE: A lot going on. A lot going on. So we talked a little bit about the evolving landscape. And does that make Stride nervous in terms of the future and where you see your company in a couple of years? Or is that just for greater opportunity?

NOAH LANG: There's headwinds, and there's tailwinds always. And especially when you're dealing with health care and taxes, it's going to change. It changes rather slowly. But I think lately we've seen an opening up of new market opportunities.

So one is actually this direct integration to [healthcare.gov](https://www.healthcare.gov). It is an awesome piece of software that probably rivals what you saw from the IRS in building out a system to e-file. Your taxes. It may even be more complex than that. But that's effectively what it feels like for a consumer-- is you can go to a private software company and figure all this out and not deal with the IRS. We're doing the same thing for health care for people who buy it on their own.

And now we're seeing new market opportunities continue to be opened up. So one is the individual coverage HRA, which, if you're not familiar, is a way for employers to put money in a tax-advantaged way-- tax-free dollars-- into an HRA that employees can spend on individual health insurance. And then it's specifically tied to our market. So these are the same plans that you can buy on [healthcare.gov](https://www.healthcare.gov) and you can buy on Stride. And it's forecast to double our market, to double that market.

Now, these are not independent contractors and part-time workers even, necessarily. This is the individual market. And so while I'm not a believer that the employer market is going to go away, there is going to be a continued shift both in terms of workforce trends and growth in this freelance economy and

now employees being given, as we talked about before, a defined contribution to spend on their own. And I think that's a huge enabler to have a tax-advantaged opportunity to invest in your employees. So I think that's one of the big ones.

I think on a state basis, we're seeing more innovation as well. So the state of California has actually brought two things to the table. One is it did bring penalties back, the individual mandate penalty, in order to fund Advanced Premium Tax Credits for a new tier of Americans. So across every other state in the country, you can get assistance in the form of the Advanced Premium Tax Credit up to 400% of the federal poverty level.

In California now, they just took it from 400% to 600%. So that basically means people who make \$45,000 or \$50,000 up to even \$75,000 a year as individuals now have access to assistance. We're filling a gap in the market of folks for whom individual private insurance coverage was expensive-- is now more affordable.

So we're seeing some states really lean in, build their own programs, and create an opportunity for more financial assistance, which again is forecast to grow the market. So while you're seeing less government investment in their call centers and their marketing communications, we are seeing some innovations from the technology and opening up new tax advantage opportunities for individuals to get coverage.

STEVE BLUMENFIELD: That also leaves a nice avenue for companies like Stride because you become the translator. You're the graphical user interface for all of these government programs. Whatever happens with ICRA, you'll be able to make that easily digestible and accessible to purchase those solutions that they're intended to propagate in the market.

Early days when we were talking, Noah, one of the things that went off in my head kind of a light bulb for me, was, oh, Stride is kind of the HR department for people without HR departments. So you're solving a lot of the things that we take for granted as workers of medium- or large-sized companies that provide benefits.

We have the company helping us sort out our payroll taxes and helping us think through how we can save things. We probably have a 401(k) or even a pension depending upon where you are. And we have a lot of those voluntary benefits and ancillary benefits, as you called them earlier, a lot of things made available to us that help improve our lives.

You're really that for the independent worker. And increasingly, you are that to help companies enable those independent workers who work on their behalf to take advantage of that kind of a solution.

NOAH LANG: I couldn't say it better myself. It's a huge gap, right? I do agree we take it for granted that we've had that ecosystem built into our full-time jobs for the last 60 or 70 years here. But as people decouple from traditional employment, we have to find a way to, frankly, decouple some of that lock-in benefits infrastructure.

And it may look and feel a little bit different than full-time benefits. You don't think about your employer helping you with your taxes. But that's a key, key and tremendous benefit if you're an independent contractor. So we have to rethink what the benefits stack should be for an independent, part-time workforce. But we're filling that void that's left when you don't get access to an HR team. And in some ways we're sort of your personal CFO helping run yourself like a business.

STEVE BLUMENFIELD: So Noah, I have observed during this call that Ashley asks really good questions. And I don't because I measure myself during these calls with a metric of how many times the person we're talking to says, that's a good question. And Ashley has gotten about every single question to say, that's a good question. So Ashley, I know you must have a good question in there about metrics.

ASHLEY DOYLE: That's awesome. So yeah, so an employer would partner with Stride from an attraction and retention perspective. But how is your solution really measured from the employer's perspective?

NOAH LANG: Ashley, that is just not a good question. I'm just kidding.

[LAUGHTER]

STEVE BLUMENFIELD: Now you're pandering to me.

ASHLEY DOYLE: Come on, now. We've done so well.

STEVE BLUMENFIELD: I appreciate that, Noah. If you could say that for the rest of her questions, I'd feel better about myself.

[LAUGHTER]

NOAH LANG: In all seriousness, so you're right. It comes down to loyalty, retention. And so we have a couple of key moments of the year that we can produce really actionable data. Most of our activation today comes during our open enrollment period, which is in November and December of every year, tied to the open enrollment period for the federal exchange.

What employers are measuring in that time period is really two key things. How many people are using Stride? And how much money are we saving them? So we produce metrics for all of our clients after the open enrollment period and during the open enrollment period as they're driving their activation campaigns because you've really just got about six weeks to activate your workforce on how well they're doing and how well we're doing together in saving them money.

We then have a key touchpoint, post-open enrollment, that transitions into managing that workforce throughout the year. You can enroll in coverage throughout the year if it's major medical and you have a qualifying event. You can enroll in coverage. For everything else in our benefits stack, you can actually enroll any day of the year. But most of the activation comes during November and December.

And so the rest of the year, we're actually moderating, managing, and reporting back to the employer on whether or not people are coming back, with what frequency, how else we're saving them time and money. So if they're coming back, they're using our app, and they're managing their expenses, recording their expenses, we can report back to an employer what their deductions savings is going to be come tax time.

And then we work with the employers that measure loyalty and affinity. And we've found thus far that each workforce, whether they're a digital work marketplace or a traditional employer, can measure that in different ways. Some measure employee NPS. Others take a softer survey approach to understanding what things are driving loyalty and affinity.

And then we directly measure NPS of our user base and cut up that feedback and share it back with employers, including some very granular data on where they're satisfied with the platform and what else they want and need. And frankly, the what else they want and need is what's led us to continue expanding Stride from a health coverage recommendation engine to a complete benefits platform for independent workforces.

ASHLEY DOYLE: Yeah. And we've definitely seen that evolution. And that's so great that you're collecting that feedback and evolving to better meet your clients' and the independent workers' needs. So one point that you just mentioned that I wanted to underscore was the longer-- or six week, I believe you mentioned-- open enrollment period, which is different than-- most group coverages would be typically around the two- to three-week mark.

So that is great in terms of having the ability to report within that time frame to make sure that you're getting the right amount of folks driven to Stride to make those decisions and, if you're not, that you can course correct and enhance the communication throughout that open enrollment period while there's still time. So that's phenomenal.

NOAH LANG: That's right. And you do see-- just a little more color on that-- the behavior you see in that six-week period looks like the behavior of just about anything else Americans do, which is they procrastinate, procrastinate, procrastinate. So most people are enrolling in the last few days, which I'm sure you see in your full-time occupations as well.

But that's where really getting the right communications plan out, which we've honed for these audiences, early means they're going to be more successful. They're going to enroll at a higher rate. And they're going to have a greater opportunity to save because they get the job done early and on time.

Independent workers are three times as likely to go uninsured as the average American. And so in some cases, this is about getting someone to a better decision to save more money and get set up for a year of health success. But in many cases, it's also just making sure they don't miss the boat. Because if they miss the boat, they're out of luck for the next year.

And so I think it's an underappreciated fact as the way the world works shifts. And employers-- even if you're not doing this for direct loyalty or retention and impact, it's the right thing to do to drive awareness of these deadlines and of the opportunity to drive some real financial security into a huge portion of the American workforce.

STEVE BLUMENFIELD: Our companies would love to help people do that. And that's a wonderful thing to have drive you. We as humans just love to run under doors as they're shutting. But in the reality of our decision-making process, we think about things when we need them. And we think about getting health care when we're sick.

Unless someone's driving us to really think about the coverage we'll need if we get sick, it's easy not to do it, especially if it's expensive and complicated, which is what the insurance industry around health care is for the average consumer without an employer to help them do it. So you simplify that. And I can't emphasize more what you're saying or enough what you're saying. Helping people to see this is even available is just hugely important.

So Noah, let's get a little more esoteric here. Is there a metaphor or some way of thinking about the challenge that you're trying to tackle on behalf of independent workers that you guys think about?

NOAH LANG: I'll give you this one. That's a great question.

[LAUGHTER]

STEVE BLUMENFIELD: Yes! You can stop right there.

NOAH LANG: I think the best metaphor to think about is really giving the independent workforce the level of plug-and-play benefits that you get in a full-time paycheck that you don't get when you're getting paid as an independent contractor.

STEVE BLUMENFIELD: Awesome. That's a great metaphor. Hey, Noah, if you would, just tell our folks-- you've used the term NPS a few times. Can you just spell it out for folks who might not know what that means?

NOAH LANG: NPS is Net Promoter Score. And effectively what it means is, is this person likely to recommend me to friends or family members? You see a lot of this used in traditional consumer product development.

We are seeing more of it used now for employees. What's the likelihood that my employees are going to recommend Stride as a place to work to their friends and family? And it's sort of the ultimate measure of whether or not someone is satisfied with your product or, in this case, with the work environment that you've created.

ASHLEY DOYLE: Yeah. And so to gather that information, again, that would be an employer asking their population and then providing that feedback to Stride, correct?

NOAH LANG: That's right.

ASHLEY DOYLE: Yeah. Yeah. So I'm going to go off of Steve's crazy questions here and ask you, if you were an animal, if your company was an animal, what would it be and why?

NOAH LANG: Oh, wow. OK, an animal. All right. I'm going to have fun with this one, too. There's a lot of animals that come to mind, but I'll give you a fun one. I think we're a golden retriever. How's that? We provide a great user experience. Who doesn't like the golden retriever? Always they're smiling, delightful, light on your toes.

But golden retrievers are pretty smart, right? They can do some pretty incredible things, and they're loyal. And I'd say we're loyal to our members first. I think we drive a tremendous impact for large employers and their independent workforces. But every single thing that we do is loyal to the member. And that's our first principle here-- is, how do we ensure someone is successful at an individual level?

So yeah, we like to have the fun of a golden retriever but make sure that we're using our brains. We've built great software that takes that work and heavy lifting off of our members. And it's about loyalty by doing the right thing for them.

ASHLEY DOYLE: Awesome. Yeah. And not only to start with the technology, but then the customer service if there is a challenge so that appropriate resolutions come to the plate here.

NOAH LANG: Peace of mind knowing there's someone they can reach out to. And so we provide that for anyone who wants it.

STEVE BLUMENFIELD: And golden retrievers give that peace of mind and comfort, too. So I'm getting an image here of golden retriever that doesn't lose fur or slobber on you.

NOAH LANG: You can train them right, you know?

[LAUGHTER]

STEVE BLUMENFIELD: All right. Let's go one more on that. If Stride were a mythological creature, what would that be?

NOAH LANG: Wow. So if we were a mythological creature, we're kind of unusual in that we're probably an oddball on your podcast. We do not plug into the traditional benefits ecosystem. We sort of live in a new world.

And so I'm going to go with a very odd mythological creature, which is the centaur, half man, half horse stuck in two different worlds at once, benefits and the future of work. And our job is to merge those two worlds together, benefits and financial security and the way people work today. I don't know if that totally plays. But that would be my mythological creature.

STEVE BLUMENFIELD: Oh, no. That's great. And in fact, you're the second person to mention centaur, which, by the way, the first was a completely different type of solution. So I've got to look into centaurs. They sound pretty cool. Anything else, Noah, we didn't cover off that you think would be important for us to ask you or to talk about today?

NOAH LANG: No. Look, I'm thrilled to be on the podcast. I think that together, I know your team spends a lot of time focused on the traditional full-timer suite of benefits. And I'm pleased to be collaborating with you now as the way the world of work shifts. And employers increasingly are taking advantage of and acknowledging the opportunity that technology has afforded to create more flexible workforces, hone in on people's skills, better match supply and demand, and create a more fluid employment ecosystem, especially in a world where you have near full employment.

And the missing piece is financial security. And that's what we're here to deliver for independent workers. And I'm glad to see Willis Towers Watson leaning into this and your employer clients really starting to figure out you can adapt the loyalty, affinity, and financial security that you give to your full-time employees in a world of independent contractor, freelance, part-time, and seasonal labor.

STEVE BLUMENFIELD: You mentioned that Willis Towers Watson is leaning in in this space, and that's absolutely true. We've made a big investment in what you've referred to on this podcast and many referred to as the "future of work." And as our employer clients think about the talent value proposition in this world that is undergoing economic shifts you mentioned, we believe it's really important to help our employers to prepare. So yes, thanks.

NOAH LANG: This workforce will continue to grow. But what's really going to give it legs is the ability to secure the people who are doing work in that way.

ASHLEY DOYLE: So suppose it's five years from now, and you have a cover story in your favorite business magazine. What would your headline be?

NOAH LANG: You can now get better benefits as a freelancer than at a full-time job.

STEVE BLUMENFIELD: Ooh, aspirational.

ASHLEY DOYLE: Wow, yeah.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

STEVE BLUMENFIELD: Well, Noah, we wanted to thank you for joining us today. It's been our pleasure to host you on this podcast. And we look forward to seeing you in the market. Thanks, everybody, for listening.

NOAH LANG: Thank you so much.

ASHLEY DOYLE: And for more information, feel free to go to stridebenefits.com.

STEVE BLUMENFIELD: Thank you for joining us for this Willis Towers Watson podcast featuring the latest thinking on the intersection of people, capital, and risk. For more information, visit the Insights section of willistowerswatson.com.