

## **Revolutionizing Workforce Development: Doug Walker's Vision**

Host: Maggie John

### **Overview:**

In this episode, Doug Walker joins us to discuss the role of technology in helping SMEs achieve their full potential. Doug Walker is a veteran of the Canadian technology industry and a graduate of Toronto Metropolitan University. His career began at IBM, followed by leadership roles in SMEs and global enterprises. Doug served as President of Silicon Graphics Canada (which acquired Cray Computing) and CEO of Alias Systems and BitTorrent. He co-founded WhoPlusYou with Joanne Rusnell (COO) and Al Lopez (CPO). Walker shares why SMEs aren't connecting with the support the government makes available, why one size fits all solutions don't work for Canada's economy, and what he's learned from the 70,000+ businesses using Magnet.

### **Highlights from our conversation include:**

1. SMEs are in survival mode and don't have the time or resources to access support, even when it's available. Technology needs to play a role in streamlining how SMEs identify and access funding, training opportunities, etc.
2. Canada has traditionally taken the approach of spreading SME support across several buckets and programs. Walker advocates for comprehensive support programs that combine training, funding, and labour market information.
3. AI isn't just about making things go faster. For businesses, we need to consider how AI can be used for very specific purposes to boost their outcomes.

**MAGGIE:**

We are back at Magnet Network Live, and I'm here with Doug Walker.

Doug is the CEO of WhoPlusYou, a private technology company that powers the Magnet platform. He specializes in developing technology solutions that connect job seekers, employers, and educators to address labor market challenges.

How are you, Doug?

**DOUG:**

I'm swell, thank you.

**MAGGIE:**

What has been your biggest takeaway from the sessions that you've attended so far?

**DOUG:**

I think that there's sort of a common theme that's running through the sessions right now. It's all about SMEs in Canada and how you actually approach SMEs and how you connect them to government programs.

And it's a pickle. It's a big problem. We've heard a lot about, I think, the problems associated with this. Haven't heard a lot about the solutions to do what we need to do to move the economy forward.

**MAGGIE:**

Yeah. And what do you think are a part of those solutions? What are the things that we need to be leaning into?

**DOUG:**

I think we really need to understand what SMEs actually are.

If the government thinks it's going to move workforce development forward, economic development forward, and it's going to rely on SMEs to do that, you have to understand what the actual marketplace in Canada looks like.

I mean, there's 1.3 million companies in Canada, 97% of which are SMEs. SMEs have got, always have, problems with funding. They don't have their own HR departments. They don't have their own training departments.

And they could give a hoot about whether Canada's economy is going to move forward on their backs.

**MAGGIE:**

They're just trying to survive for the most part.

**DOUG:**

Yeah, their goal is where's the next paycheck? Where's the next payroll? How am I going to pay back my small business loan? They're not thinking about, hey, I want to grow the GDP by 1.1% in British Columbia this year. That is not on their minds.

So what the country has traditionally done is it's taken funding and it's put that funding into buckets with partners who've got good goals to help SMEs out.

But the SMEs won't listen until there's some kind of a comprehensive program that gets to them without them trying very hard. And not only includes just one thing, like one, you know, financial support item, but includes all the supports that they need to be successful.

And that could be a wide array of things, right? Certainly funding is top of the charts, but on top of that, it's like, how do I get the right content to train my people?

What training do my people need? What labor market information do I require for my area to actually make the right business decisions?

How do I stay informed about government programs as they develop and move on?

All of those things are extremely important, but you have to package them in such a way that what you're building for a community is what that community specifically needs to drive the outcomes that the programs are put together for in the government.

And that's not being done.

**MAGGIE:**

No. Yeah, you're right. I mean, there are a lot of questions that still have to be answered when it comes to that.

And I agree, leaning into and realizing, as you said, the SMEs does categorize for a large proportion of a lot of the income that's coming into this country. We need to focus in on that more.

**DOUG:**

We absolutely do. And we need to coordinate it.

And so the idea behind...now, I've been working with Magnet for 10-plus years. We've been trying to look for ways to understand these problems and build things, processes, technology. You know, whatever it happens to be the suite to address some of these things.

In the last 10 years, we've also garnered an audience. We've had about 280,000 individuals on the system. We've got about 70,000 employers, 500 partners.

**MAGGIE:**

Wow.

**DOUG:**

Government relations that are really good. And mainly we've been trying to learn from all of those things, you know, because it's not a simple, you know, egg to crack, just doing.

And so, you know, that's what we've been up to.

WhoPlusYou, in conjunction with Magnet, has developed technologies that allow for communities to come together.

So we can say, go to any one geography and if the goal is workforce development, that's not what we say the goal is. We say the goal is helping companies perform better by introducing the right support structures to those organizations and coordinating them.

And then we make sure that we've got ways to communicate with those SMEs so that they're not having to look for things themselves because they're just not going to do that.

**MAGGIE:**

And, you know, Doug, I do want to get to what you're doing. But even as you said that last point, I don't think it's because SMEs don't want to look into these other areas. It's just, again, it's time. It's finances. It's, you know, the top person is doing multiple things at once.

**DOUG:**

No, that's exactly right. It's survival.

**MAGGIE:**

So let's talk about digital platforms. What is the role or what do you see the role digital platforms like WhoPlusYou play in bridging the gap between job seekers, employers and educational institutions in evolving the labor market?

**DOUG:**

Well, I mean, so the...there's been a...backup one step.

Yeah, there's been all kinds of solutions like Indeed in the marketplace. You know, organizations that connect people to jobs. Yeah. That's not what we do.

Okay, what we do is we look for projects for communities that are trying to achieve a certain purpose, and then we build projects around those communities and apply the right technologies.

**MAGGIE:**

Right.

**DOUG:**

And those technologies could be any number of things. It depends on the community.

The approach we've taken is to develop a digital platform, a pipeline, a backbone that says, hey, we're not about competing with you. We're about collaborating with you.

So we can plug and play the technologies that any one community needs. And this is how you start to get to the solutions.

And we can communicate across and between those technologies and across and between those content providers. And then you start to get a more fuller solution.

And that's the next step, in our opinion, where digital technology can actually be used to push forward a marketplace.

It's not about pushing forward any one SME. It's about creating programs to support thousands or hundreds of thousands of SMEs towards a specific goal.

That goal could be workforce development, but it could also be thematic. It could be systems for persons with disabilities, right? It could be systems for youth, immigration, whatever it happens to be.

We can wrap this kind of digital technology around any theme and bring in any resources we need to communicate between themselves and build a larger, fuller solution.

**MAGGIE:**

Give us an example of a project that you've worked on where you've been able to do that.

**DOUG:**

Yeah, sure. So one project would be a project for the federal government called Student Workforce Placement Program (*sic*: Student Work Placement Program), I'm sorry, SWPP, where we work with employers across the country, and we connect them to all the post-secondary institutions across the country.

No longer does an employer have to put up a job posting at, say, 35 universities or colleges. They can do one posting. They can select exactly which ones they want to communicate with, and then the whole system works to connect them to the students, the students to them, in a proactive way, as opposed to trying to get them to submit a resume or do whatever they have to do on a per-school basis. And it just saves a lot of time, and they get much more visibility.

**MAGGIE:**

Yeah, probably a lot more traction as well.

**DOUG:**

A lot more traction, yeah.

**MAGGIE:**

How can technology be leveraged to create more efficient and inclusive hiring practices that benefit both employers and also job seekers, Doug?

**DOUG:**

Well, so I think the inclusive pieces are really specific pieces for us. We've got a whole diversity component of the technology we developed that allows for employers to be able to say, hey, I'm looking for persons that have this particular categorical condition, whatever that happens to be.

And so now when an employer posts a job, it can anonymously reach people that may not want to expose that they've got a certain disability, but they say in their profile they have it. Once they see the job offering, they may decide to disclose, but they don't disclose before.

It's protecting the person with the disability while getting the employers to connect with the people sort of seamlessly and not like openly have to look for them.

**MAGGIE:**

So explain that a little bit more. An employer would post that they're looking for somebody with a disability of some sort.

**DOUG:**

Right.

**MAGGIE:**

And that would secretly be funneled to people who have identified with that disability. Is that what you mean?

**DOUG:**

That's exactly right.

**MAGGIE:**

Wow.

**DOUG:**

That's exactly right. And so what ends up happening is in their profile or in their system or inbox, whatever it happens to be, they get an invitation. They look at the invitation and they say, well, that doesn't interest me. The employer doesn't know who that person is at that point in time. Or they say it does interest me and I'm willing to share, click of a button, and now they're connected to the employer.

**MAGGIE:**

And are you seeing more employers saying, yeah, I'm looking for diverse people of all sorts of walks of life in it, you know, looking deliberately for certain... certain people to bring on to their team?



**DOUG:**

Yeah. Well, there's a bifurcation, right? If you're an SME, you're just fighting.

**MAGGIE:**

You're just looking for somebody.

**DOUG:**

You just got to, you know, it's like the Indeed commercial, sound engineer gone, you need a new sound engineer, right? That kind of thing, right? But if you're a larger corporation in Canada, you've got goals, right? You need, not only because it's mandated in some forms, but because this is the right thing to do, right? And diversity, in my opinion, at least, brings better workforce. And so, yeah, we see it more in the larger corporations. We see it when we're working, for example, with the Royal Bank, you know, and they say, hey, you know, listen, across the country, we believe in diversity and we want to make sure that we're casting a wide enough net and targeting it properly to make sure people know that we want this to happen inside of the Royal Bank.

**MAGGIE:**

I love this, Doug. I love it because it's intentionally saying, hey, how can we help you diversify your team? And you're doing it. I love the intentionality of the employer saying, yeah, this is what we're looking for. This is how we want to curate our team to be able to represent our country well. And you're able to come alongside and say, hey, we have the perfect person for you.

**DOUG:**

And we'll obviously combine that with the skills that require an educational experience and all of those wonderful things. Everybody does that. But we'll advance that. And this conference has been a lot about AI. And we've got AI implemented in our technology. We'll continue to do that and all that stuff. But it's not the goal. The goal is to use AI technology for very specific purposes to better the experience of anybody that is using the digital technology. It's not just, hey, whiz, bang, here, create

me a resume. That I don't think in the end is what's going to work. What's going to work is you feel like you're being supported better and you're being supported with more knowledge that's real when you're participating in any of these activities that will work.

**MAGGIE:**

Doug, thanks for dropping by.

**DOUG:**

It's my pleasure.

**MAGGIE:**

That was Doug Walker. He is the CEO of Who Plus You.