



ADA Live! Episode 126: Synergies Work: Growing Disability-Owned Small Businesses

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Guest: [Aarti Sahgal](#), Founder & CEO of Synergies Work

Moderator & Host: [Pam Williamson](#), Assistant Project Director of the Southeast ADA Center

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Aarti Sahgal: Hi, I'm Aarti Sahgal and you're listening to ADA life.

Music

Pamela Williamson:

Hello, everyone. On behalf of the southeast ADA Center, the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University, and the ADA National Network. Welcome to ADA live. I'm Pam Williamson, Assistant Director of the South East ADA Center. listening audience. If you have any questions about the Americans with Disabilities Act, or ADA, you can use the online form anytime at [Ada Live.org](https://AdaLive.org) or call the Southeast ADA Center at 404-541-9001. All calls are free and confidential. Synergies Work is the largest nonprofit in the United States that enables entrepreneurs with disabilities to build sustainable micro enterprises. They provide end to end business solutions and bridge the opportunity gaps between the disability and the business communities. synergies work believes that by empowering entrepreneurs with disabilities, they can create a more inclusive society and a better world

for all synergies work as a personal mission of its founder Aarti Sahgal, her vision stems from her life experiences as a parent of a young adult with Down syndrome, who is constantly challenging the bias of low expectations that excludes people with disabilities from living their true potential. During this episode of ADA live, we talked with already about the organization she founded synergies work and her personal mission to create inclusive communities and workforce strategies for people with disabilities. Aarti, welcome to today's program.

Aarti Sahgal:

Hi, Pam. Welcome. Thank thanks for inviting me today.

Pamela Williamson:

Now already, you and I have been colleagues for quite a while so and most recently, we serve together on the board of directors of the Georgia Association of people supporting employment first or Georgia APSE. While working to promote employment first in Georgia. We asked you to be our guest on ADA live today to talk about the organization you founded synergies work. So what is the story behind synergies work and who or what inspired you?

Aarti Sahgal:

As you shared, I'm a mother of two sons. My younger son has Down syndrome. He was born in India, in 2000. And at that time, they weren't many resources for people with disabilities. So my husband and I made a simple promise to ourselves that we will provide him with the same resources and opportunities as our oldest son. And it is this mission that has promised that we made that has guided my journey all along. When he was four years old, we got transferred to United States - Atlanta here. And I realized very fast very soon that what the law promised us for education for Ungar was not really happening and unfolding like that on the ground. And it made me pause and rethink what I needed to do. And I wanted to wrap around my head around why is there a gap? Why are there two worlds that exist today? One for people with disabilities and one without? And so how can I bridge that gap started with hunger, but it's a promise that has evolved over the years to

continue to find a solution to bridging the two worlds that continue to exist amongst us for everybody. I started working with the parent to parent of Georgia and then very soon started working as a consultant to Georgia Council on Developmental Disabilities, looking at building real communities, and also worked on projects and it was still not talking about economic inclusion in the real sense. Six years ago, or so my oldest son when he quit his job with a bank to start do his first startup. It made me realize that while he would have the opportunity to do this work, start a company fail and hopefully start again, that same opportunity would not be provided to anger and other people with disabilities. And that's what got me thinking, researching on how do people with disability start their businesses, where are the resources, and who is welcoming them into their spaces. And it is out of this research that synergies work was born. And as the name suggests, it's all about building synergies between the disability community and the business community.

Pamela Williamson:

Well, already, that is a powerful story, and we appreciate you sharing it with us. What is the primary mission and focus of Synergies Work?

Aarti Sahgal:

What we say is the purpose is to build one world where people with disabilities belong. And I mentioned this to be the premier startup hub, which caters to entrepreneurs across the entire entrepreneurial journey, whether you are a person who is thinking of setting up a business, we want to provide to that resources or you're scaling your business, we want to provide you with those resources. Our primary goal is therefore to bridge the disability wealth gap through entrepreneurship. That's what we do. And as the name suggests, it's about building synergies. The programs that we offer through synergies work are for folks who found us with disabilities. And it's not that we're doing anything different from all the other accelerators in the country in the world. It just that it is creating a community and representation of disabled founders in the country, which prides itself on, you know, living your American dream, business centered, and for employment and enterprise being the primary goal there. So that's what we do simply bridge that disability wealth gap through entrepreneurship.

Pamela Williamson:

It's obvious that part of your mission to being improving the lives of people with disabilities who want careers as business owners and opportunities that there's been a great impact. What would you say, has been one of the greatest impacts of Synergies Work?

Aarti Sahgal:

If I can sum it up, the one good impact is that when someone walks out of the program, and is able to pursue their passion and a dream and live their life with purpose, and how do we say that is that being an entrepreneur, being a founder is difficult for everybody. It's not an easy passion or a path. It requires a lot of hard work, and all of that if you have the added presentation of a disability, then it becomes one more things but at the same time, I say that having a disability actually sets you up for success. Because you have an entrepreneurial mindset. You as an entrepreneur, you are a person who is always looking at opportunities in the problems and the difficulties that you face. And many people with disabilities are constantly navigating this ableistic world every day in the morning. So they know how to face a challenge. They know how to make use of problem and find a solution. So they have an added advantage. You know, it was really in the fall of 2020 that we started our accelerator program. And since then, we have served 300 entrepreneurs across the nation. We are currently have founders from more around 20 states. We did a midfielder review impact for our organization for the first time in 2023. And the numbers from their show that the entrepreneurs after completing the program have the average first year revenue for them is more than \$8,000. And they are able to hire at least two additional people apart from themselves within the first two years. The first two years for any business are the most critical years. 50% of businesses fail in the first two years. And we find that our averages are five times better than the national average for all businesses across the spectrum. So for me it is when an entrepreneur comes back and tells me that they have hired another person or they are excited in the morning to get up and tackle the day and they feel that they are fulfilled and they're happy or they refer us to someone else. That's a success for us right there.

Pamela Williamson:

That is so exciting. 300 people served since the fall of 2020. These businesses are getting started and hiring other people. So tell us Do you have any specific examples of success stories you can share?

Aarti Sahgal:

Right here in Atlanta, there's this young person called Jasmine Duffy. She's a spoken word artist and a music engineer. She was one of the National Basketball players in the country were before she lost her vision. And that changed the trajectory of her life. She since then has become a sound engineer. And she learned how to produce without sight and adopted a spoken word persona called blinded by ambition. She joined our program last year, as she has since then performed in a lot of places, including the EDDY awards that we started in 2023. She's performed at the Georgia APSE conference recently, and recently, she launched her own apparel and printing business also. And she creates merch that is a streetwear and provides the same services for other artists, local artists in Atlanta. There is a gentleman in Tennessee, Ashton Gilbert, who, you know, like many other students with disabilities as they graduate out of school have no, it's like falling off the cliff with no future. So during the COVID times his mum actually runs a business and she had a whole bunch of cartons lying around. And that was his job that was assigned to him was to break down the cartons and recycle them. And out of that came this business idea. And he started a recycling company, he came to us again and last year, and since then I Ashton have started, not only is good get earning a revenue of more than \$20,000 per annum, he has we were able to give him a little grant, he has his own air condition van now. They're thinking about scaling and scaling, even doing franchise because now they get calls from other people across the country to see how they can use their system and their model of business to scale. There is a young gentleman in LA, who runs a soap based business, it's called Trev's Trades. The same story a mum and Trevor started his own organic soap business. He has a following of more than 100,000 people on social media, his soaps are so beautiful and so pretty to look at not only great to smelling and organic, that as soon as he opens up his shop, they outsell themselves. And the problem

now that they are faced in which is a good problem of how to scale their business. Again, a huge success story they have already moved on to a new facility heights and people having this dilemma of making sure that they are matching the sales demand that they have now.

Pamela Williamson:

The three you have shared are just absolutely awesome. And I have had the privilege of hearing Jasmine Duffy speak and she is quite the powerhouse. I would like to transition here for a moment and synergies work is got all this great thing stuff going on. So how are you different than other organizations that might have similar goals?

Aarti Sahgal:

What separates us is our a single minded purpose behind the organization that we are a catalyst between the disability and the business community. In the ideal scenario, there should not be a place for an organization like synergies work, every accelerator in the country should be opening their doors and welcoming people with diverse minds and diverse bodies, into their accelerators because it's only why when we think differently, and we bring in different perspectives that innovation happens. And in the world where we are talking about disability innovation, technology innovation, I am sometimes flabbergasted and frustrated that we are not yet talking and welcoming these diverse perspectives, but the things are changing. And it is hoping and hoping that I don't think it's very far they're really the voices of diverse voices of people with disabilities would be heard and listened to. In terms of our programming, I think we are our biggest strength is that we are building a community of entrepreneurs with disabilities. representation matters. I believe very strongly in that our team is all entrepreneurs actually who have gone through the program. And they are the ones who lead the program. So their perspectives and their learnings are very important and critical in the programming that we do. We have an online platform, the community hub, which is free to everyone to join and this is one of the unique platforms where we have close to three 100 entrepreneurs, that's I think what is very encouraging because when I, we have community meetups regularly, and these are the community meetups which are not necessarily only about business, but they are

about life. And it's about the synergies that each founder brings to the table. A person might be a blind graphic designer. And there might be another business who is looking for a graphic designer. And that's that's where the barter system happens. Hey, listen, I can do this for you or can you open that door for me? It's not always that you know, you need to look outside, it's within the community, there is so much of richness of, and wealth of experience and networks. That's that happened really on that thing that everything that we share everything article resources, conversations have been created by our own founders hear from the founders that they felt that they were the only ones in this world until they entered the cohort and said, Hmm, we are not alone. There's so many other people like us. And so that gives them the encouragement and knowing that they can be vulnerable in that space, and there'll be somebody who will support them.

Pamela Williamson:

Well, I just love that you're building community and really helping to connect the businesses and it so folks can learn from one another. Well, already you have provided great information so far. We're going to give a chance for our ADA live listening audience to submit questions on this or any other topic at Ada Live dot o RG or call the SE ADA Center at 404-541-9001. And now a word from our episode sponsor synergies work.

Voice Over

Synergies Work helps entrepreneurs with disabilities turn their visions into reality. With the largest community of disability led startups in the United States. synergies work connects disabled entrepreneurs with the resources networks and communities they need to launch grow and scale their businesses. Learn more about synergies work by visiting their website at synergieswork.org.

Pamela Williamson:

Welcome back, everyone. I'm Pam Williams. I'm with the South East ADA Center. And our guest today is **Aarti Sahgal**. And she is the founder and chief executive officer of the nonprofit organization synergies work. We've been talking about how synergies work builds inclusive communities and create successful employment strategies for individuals with disabilities. We know that collaboration is fundamental and growing nonprofit organization. So how does synergies work, collaborate with other organization businesses and communities to achieve its goals?

Aarti Sahgal:

Yeah, you're right Pam, there is no work that can be done without collaboration. That's the primary focus of synergies work is to partner so we partner with almost every disability organization. We are constantly sharing authorities and opportunities that might come through synergies work with all the disability organizations we engage the business community of not only just we are not looking for only sponsorships, it's a long term partnership that we are looking for. So whether it is through mentorship, or through having a conversation on diversity and disability for the teams a lunch and learn or sponsoring any of the events. It's a broader concept because there are so many organizations in the ecosystem that are supporting small business growth. And we would love for them to hear about and consider welcoming founders with disabilities into their network. So it increases and expands their bandwidth, their footprint and it allows them an opportunity to look into this really very diverse population, which we do masterclasses every month, and that's another opportunity for business leaders are subject matter experts to come and share on a particular topic. And finally, last year, in 2023, we started the area words, and I'll share here. You know, we want to know what from the truest Foundation, the year before that. And even at my age, I was so pleased to be recognized and you know, to have that award ceremony when I got back and maybe pause and think that we have so many entrepreneurs with disabilities who have not been recognized in the country. And I would say across the world, there is no award ceremony which talks about recognizing disabled founders. And out of that came this thing. Let's start an award event. We call it the

EDDIE. Eddie stands for entrepreneurs dedicated to diverse and inclusive excellence, their better than the Oscars. Where we roll out the red carpet, there are five different categories in which we ask for applications from the entrepreneurs, whether you're a newcomer, or you are going for your seed funding, or you have a brick and mortar business or a technology business, everybody's welcome to apply. We have an independent judging body from across the country, who will decide on the spy categories we flying all expenses paid the winners in each category to Atlanta for an evening of celebration. We take care and have a designer business attire done for the winners. We provide them with not only Entrepreneur of the Year Award recipient gets a \$10,000 plus a whole bunch of wraparound services from business leaders for their business. And that's the idea is a celebration, recognition of the work, but also actually going back to what we stand for building synergies because I can stand and shout from the rooftops that there is so much of talent in this community, but till people don't see here for themselves, they will not believe it. I know it was a magical evening, it is really a joy for people to connect and see and meet such talent and have a fun day. So that's some of the ways that we are we are working to build collaboration with businesses across and one of the other things that we have done is we have also launched the synergies market, which again, is a free opportunity for all small business founders to come together. It's a platform to sell their products and services on the synergies market. It's a free of charge at this time, we are trying to bring the founders together, we are trying to reach out to individuals and corporations to see how we can bridge this supplier window by a gap that exists. So organizations believe in ESG. In supplier diversity, here is an opportunity where you can support individual vendors and suppliers and encourage them to grow so that they can join your diversity team goals. So that's a few of the ways that over the years.

Pamela Williamson:

Well Aarti, this really shows to me how Synergies Work has taken one of my favorite quotes and made it come to life. Helen Keller said alone we can do so little together we can do so much. And so you have made that come alive and congrats on the truest

award. So I know that that was a quite the honor for you and your organization. You've talked about many unique things that you've done. And of course, the COVID 19 pandemic really brought about unprecedented challenges for people with disabilities and organizations worldwide. Were there some unique and innovative solutions that synergies weren't put into place to navigate these challenges?

Aarti Sahgal:

It's interesting, you asked me this question. We started as an art incubator before that, and we were working with artists with disabilities and everything was in a space bound by space, we will hope we had an honor of doing again, of course building partnerships with corporations. So we had the honor of being invited to the Coca Cola campus. And we did a huge exhibition there of artists for a couple of weeks. We were at that time just before the pandemic broke. We were invited to the Capitol. I remember the day we had that show. I had to call him in the morning and say, Hmm, no, I don't think we can risk the health of our forks. And then everything happened. And it was a time which was like made us pause and rethink strategy. I say this jokingly many times that during the pandemic, all of us discovered internet. Earlier our thinking was bound by physical spaces. But we allowed ourselves to use this period as an opportunity to see how else can could we serve and out of this time of reflection, we actually expanded our reach and network and our programming from an art Incubator we became a business incubator from being only GA base we expanded us offices across the nation. And during this time there was has been. And there is enough data and research that shows that across the nation, we saw huge growth of entrepreneurship and self employment. And this was true for folks with disabilities. Also, there was a need that was not being fulfilled, and it allowed us to serve the community better.

Pamela Williamson:

Well, already, it's obvious that you have made such great strides and that the pandemic really was a way for you to be able to rethink are not only for synergies work, but for many of us about what we do. So as we look to the future, so what are your long term goals for Synergies Work?

Aarti Sahgal:

For us, there are three pillars of growth that we are constantly looking at as an organization. One is that the grassroot integration of entrepreneurship in the country. We want the small businesses led and owned by people with disabilities to play an important role in the overall small business growth of the nation, we want that to be recognized. In order to support that, we are looking at building more collective action together, whether it is through the synergies market and expanding the platform so that constantly we are able to support and build sustainable businesses, I believe that running a business is like running on a treadmill, you always have to be constantly aware and keep running. Because if you stop, you're going to fall. And sometimes those supports and those bridge gaps that are there in the disability community to run a successful business, we want to make sure we provide those support through the platform that people can use. And finally, we want to provide money, and capital without money. No business can run and there is little money for folks with disabilities to run their businesses successfully. So we have launched the synergy Seed Fund, which is going to be the first certified CDFI community development financial institution with the sole purpose of providing loans to business ventures, and equity stake to business ventures founded by people with disabilities. And this is really the three pillars of change that we are targeting, in the years, the next two to three years to come.

Pamela Williamson:

Well Aarti, all of that sounds very exciting. And I know that some of our listeners may be interested in learning more about how they can get involved with synergies work. So what do you tell folks who would like to know more.

Aarti Sahgal:

Please come reach out, you can reach out to me directly. The best way to reach me is through synergies@synergieswork.org. We are always looking for talent, we are looking for people to get the time, money and the resources. We are also time, the time I say we're looking for people to please mark your calendars for April 11, when the area was like here at the club energy center. If you know people who you believe are EDDIE, for the EDDIE awards, please ask them to apply.

Pamela Williamson:

Alright, so that sounds great. So obviously there are many ways for folks to get involved. And I hope that people will contact us already you shared phenomenal information with us today. And we are really excited about synergies work and showing how people with disabilities How can become successful employees, business owners and entrepreneurs. And it truly is an important example of the employment first goal, which is real jobs with real wages. So as we get ready to close for the day, what advice do you have for individuals who are passionate about creating positive change and the life of people with disabilities but they're just not sure how to get started?

Aarti Sahgal:

I would say that sometimes it's our own fears that stops up because we don't know fear of the unknown that stops us from taking the first step. Think beyond what you see or hear. Reach out to a friend up person that you would have otherwise overlooked or not seen or

heard. I think it is just a question of more opening our heart and mind and to possibilities. Every day sometimes fear stops us because we it's a new territory. We don't know somebody but you just have to make a small effort. And the ripple effect can be tremendous.

Pamela Williamson:

Well already it's obvious that you and synergies work. Can your team have been a huge part of the ripple effect and the impact on so many people with disabilities and we look forward to hearing more stories in the future. We hope that everyone has enjoyed our conversation with **Aarti Sahgal:** the founder and chief executive officer of synergies work, a global nonprofit organization based in Atlanta, Georgia, and synergies work is the largest nonprofit in the United States and enables entrepreneurs with disabilities to build sustainable businesses. The listeners we thank you again for joining us for this episode of ADA live. You may access all ADA Live episodes with archived audio accessible transcripts and resources on our website at Ada Live dot o RG you may also listen to the SoundCloud ADA live channel at soundcloud.com/ADALive. And you can download ADA Live to your mobile device and your podcast app by searching for ADA Live. If you have questions about the Americans with Disabilities Act, we encourage you to use the online form anytime at adalive.org or contact your Regional ADA Center at 800-949-4232. All calls are free and confidential. Ada live is a program of the Southeast ADA Center the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University, and a collaboration with the Disability Inclusive Employment Policy Rehabilitation, Research and Training Center. Our producer is Celestia Ohrazda with Cheri Hofmann, Mary Morder, Marsha Schwanke, Chase Coleman and Barry Whaley. Our music is from four wheel city the movement for improvement. We look forward to having you join us for the next episode.

Music4 Wheel City

They watching. They don't want us be part of the city, man. They put all these steps, man. All these curbs we can't get over. All these inaccessible stores. 4 Wheel City. They don't want us here. We'll survive and we're going to make our own place. Our own world. The 4 Wheel City-

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Contact for More Information or Assistance:

Southeast ADA Center

Email: ADAsoutheast@syr.edu

Phone: 404-541-9001