

## Scaling Up Services

Episode 233 - David Shriner-Cahn

<https://www.scalingupservices.com/podcast/233-david-shriner-cahn>

David Shriner-Cahn, Community Builder, Podcaster, Consultant

After 28 years as a highly skilled employee, David was told that his job was over. In spite of the immediate trauma and fear, he knew that as his next step, he'd rather work for himself and have more control over his destiny. That was in 2006.

Today, David is a thriving community builder, podcaster and speaker. He helps high-achieving professionals, with a late-career job loss, build their consulting business, so they can do what they love and get paid what they're worth.

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## EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

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### [0:02]

You're listening to Scaling Up Services where we speak with entrepreneurs, authors, business experts and thought leaders to give you the knowledge and insights you need to scale your service based business faster and easier. And now here is your host business coach Bruce Eckfeldt.

### [0:22]

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**[0:58]**

Welcome everyone. This is Scaling Up Services, I'm Bruce Eckfeldt I'm your host, our guest today is David Shriner Cahn, he is host of two podcasts one is Smashing The lateau and the other one is called Going Solo. Dave and I are going to talk a little bit about the whole kind of question of as an entrepreneur, should you stay kind of, you know, tight and sort of solopreneur focused in terms of how you build your business and expand or should you bring on people and kind of create a company around that. It's something that I come across again, and again, with particularly around experts, you know, people are, you know, really good domain experts, experts, you know, whether it's technology, legal accounting, you know, folks that are quite good at what they do, and really kind of grappling with this issue of how do I how do I grow? How do I scale? How do I have impact and some of the different strategy so, and David does a lot of work with focus on this whole idea of going solo and the whole idea of building a practice. And we're going to talk about kind of the trade offs and some of the pros and cons of the different strategies that people have. So I'm excited about this. But that, David, welcome to the program.

**[1:59]**

Thank you so much, Bruce, thanks for inviting me.

**[2:01]**

Yeah, it's a pleasure, before we kind of dig into the topics and some of the challenges and opportunities you see folks have with this, you know, kind of going solo or building a business for themselves. What's it? What's the background? How do you get into this? What was kind of your professional experience? Give us the story?

**[2:15]**

Yeah, like many people my career was, was definitely nonlinear. I studied engineering, I worked as a chemical engineer for the first, I don't know, four to five years of my career. Two different jobs. And, you know, it's the I studied engineering, because I did well in math and science in high school. It wasn't like, there was some great strategy behind it. And, and honestly, my parents encouraged me to go into the field because it was quote, unquote, low risk, you know, something where, where you could, you know, presumably earn a decent living, and, you know, live live a nice lifestyle. So, you know, so that that was kind of how I started out. And my first kind of rude awakening came, right after I had received my second annual performance review, which was great. And I got a big raise. And then a month later, my boss called me into his office, he says, David, I have good news and bad news. Good news is you're doing a good job. The bad news is you don't have a job here anymore. And I was like, I'm somewhere else. Right? And I was like, Huh, what did I not see coming? Well, of course, you know, the company I worked for had lost a tremendous amount of business. They ended up laying off, I don't know, probably half the staff. Yeah. And then I started to think about, okay, well, is this really what I want to do just the way I want to work. And it wasn't so much the actual kind of work, it was really more of the environment. And I looked ahead and saw what was going on in the corporate world. At that point, there were there were a lot of restructurings going on. And I saw people in my field who were, you know, 30 years older than me, who were getting pushed out when they were a little short of being fully vested in their retirement packages. And I'm like, I don't know if this is really what I want to do for the next few decades, maybe there's a better way to earn a living. And, and honestly, I actually thought about being an entrepreneur at that point. I grew up in a family that was so risk averse. My parents both earned paychecks. They were never in business. It really didn't know anybody who was in business. And I thought about it. I just kind of looked into it. I just really didn't know enough about it to be able to pull it off. So I did. So plan B was a little bit of soul searching and actually a professional development program that was super helpful at that point. And I ended up going into the the nonprofit sector, people, people who knew me thought I was nuts. Because here, right I had a

master's in chemical engineering from Cornell, like, you know, great credentials. I had two good jobs. I was well paid compared to most other people. And I'm like, No, like you're taking a pay cut to do something that is a lot of work seems like kind of a thankless job. And why do you want to do this and, you know, I honestly I wanted to do something where I felt like my work was having an impact on humans in a much more direct way than than I was as an engineer.

### **[2:15]**

So, um, so I actually liked what I did. And it turned out that I actually made a pretty good living at it. Because I was in executive roles. In my first job was, was in a, an organization that was sort of very early stage. So there wasn't a lot of money in the first job. But by the time I got to my in, so I would say kind of like five years in, I was probably earning, you know, more or less what I had earned as an engineer. And, and I felt a whole lot better about what I was doing. And I ended up staying in that field for over 20 years. And honestly, all along the way, I thought about this entrepreneurship kind of over and over. And particularly in the nonprofit sector, the people that tend to be on the boards are very often people that are successful in business. So I got to see, you know, sort of much closer up how how all this entrepreneurship thing works. And and I was always intrigued by it. And I'll be honest, even though I like the work that I was doing, and I liked the environment, like the people that I worked with, and I had good relationships with everybody, I really am kind of a control freak. And I just didn't, I wanted to do my own thing my own way. And so I sort of, I would say I sort of reached a peak in my my last job where I couldn't grow any more in the organization, it was an education agency, I didn't have a PhD. So there was no way I could be the CEO, I was in a number two slot. And there were some some reshuffling that I knew was going to result in how to it's often called redundancies, like, you know, somebody else has the same skills you have, you know, and again, it was not a performance issue my case, it was like, I saw it sort of run out the clock in in the job. And so it would have been natural for me, if I again, if I pursued the linear path is like you come to a fork in the road, the linear path would be okay, I was doing well, I had good relationships, I could go on and be a CEO of another agency. And of course, I chose the fork less traveled, and I became a consultant.

### **[7:16]**

And the the actual trigger was when when my job ended. Not you know, the timing wasn't my choice. But I did see it coming for us, I sort of had planned my exit. But again, I actually did get pushed out, which is a big part of my story. And so I started a consulting business. And this is actually going back to 2006. My business has evolved over the years, in large part through, I would say, kind of networking, relationship building and content creation, like you. As you mentioned, in my introduction, I'm a podcaster. So the podcasting is sort of, it's interesting how, when you focus on a particular subject, that often becomes narrower and narrower, you go deeper and deeper. And, and I realized that a lot of what I was dealing with, and this is also my client base kept evolving in this direction to was really about this idea of experts. solopreneurs, people like me, who had been in the workforce for a long time, as an employee develop deep expertise that were mid to high level, they either got pushed out or they left on their own, they started a single person consulting business, and they kept doing the same kind of work for the similar kinds of organizations, but they'd never run a business before. And there are a lot of challenges associated with that, right. So you have to be able to get your business off the ground. And then once you get off the ground, and it's working, and you're you know, you're earning enough money to support your lifestyle. It's like, Okay, what's next, which really fits into the the mission of your show, which is, Okay, what's next when I'm running a single person consulting business? A do I want it to grow? Yeah. And if I do, then how do I grow it?

**[8:53]**

Yeah, yeah. And I think therein lies the kind of the crux of most people's, I always say what services they're, they're kind of easy to start, they're hard to scale. Or maybe, you know, maybe they're easy to start, but they're definitely harder to scale than they are to start. What do you see as being kind of the challenges for successful solopreneurs? What's the kind of recipe are the key things you need to get right to be able to just get get the business off the ground?

**[9:17]**

Well, to get it off the ground, if you're selling your expertise, it's really about your relationships. And one of the interesting things that I've heard over and over again, from my guests on my podcast, going solo, which is about these early stage consulting businesses is even people that get pushed out of their job. Their first client is very often the company that fired them. Yeah. Because what happens is, if you're if your job is terminated for reasons other than your performance, the company still needs some of what you were doing. They just may not need it. In a W two employee, they may need it in a different format. Maybe they need fewer hours, or they need a subset of what you were doing. and you have those relationships. So one of the most important things is that when you start, whether you leave on your own, or you're pushed out, make sure you maintain good relationships with your last employer and approach them for a consulting gig, because you may very well get it. And that could be like an anchor to get you off the ground as a consultant.

**[10:21]**

Yeah, yeah. And in terms of things you need to do above and beyond just being an expert, or, or having a highly desirable skill set. What are the things that you feel like good solopreneurs, you know, have or do particularly well, that that helps their business? You know?

**[10:40]**

Well, one of the most important things is a lesson I learned early on, it was about a year into my business when I joined the business networking group. And I realized that although I had good relationships with a lot of people, most of them weren't entrepreneurs. And so you want to be around people that are trying to deal with the same kinds of challenges you're dealing with. So if you again, if you come out of 2025 30 plus years of experience, like I did, you're not going to have a hard time producing great results for clients, which you're gonna have a hard time with is getting the clients lead development, prospecting, closing a sale, the whole sales process. For many people, they have never had to manage a p&l, they've never had to manage their own, like the business finances. So if you're, if your business is going to be successful as a business, you need to make money. If you're not making money, then really, it's a hobby, it's not a business. Right? So right, so you got to understand metrics, particularly financial metrics, yeah, CXO, there's a whole host of business issues, that you need to understand you're running a small business, even if your business is one person, you're still running a business, and you need to know how to do that. So what's most important, what I learned was most important is being around the right people who can a be a sounding board, they can they can suggest resources that I may need to be able to do something that I don't know how to do.

**[12:07]**

Once they get to know me and know me, well. They may be referral sources as well. So hanging around the right people is really important. And you need to be in a community or communities of people, where it's a peer relationship. It's not about everybody selling to everybody else. It's like, how do we collaborate? How do we help one another, and I have found that even when I'm in a room, whether it's a literal room, physical room, or or an online room of people that are doing what seems like the same thing as me, if it's a space with a

collaborative culture, everybody does things a little bit differently. And so we all learn from one another, and we can help one another. And some of my best business opportunities have come from people that seem like they're doing the same thing as me.

**[12:56]**

Interesting. Yeah, but just enough to have nuance or different types of companies, you work for that, it ends up being clear that you you should be doing these projects, they should be doing those projects, and you can cross refer.

**[13:06]**

Exactly, exactly. Yeah.

**[13:08]**

So let's talk about you know, once you get a successful practice, you know, up and running, you're making money, you've got, you know, some traction, you've got a pipeline, how, what are some of the, I guess, decisions that you need to make on hotword? Kind of where to take it or considerations that you find people make in terms of like, where do I go next? Do I, you know, hire people and scale this business? Do I just optimize what I do keep increasing the rates, you know, until I can kind of be more profitable, but really not grow? The organization side? Necessarily,

**[13:40]**

honestly, a lot of it is personal preference, like what kind of business do you want? How many hours? How many hours a week? Do you want to work? How many weeks a year, how many months a year, do you want to work if you you know, if you want to have a business, where let's say you're working nine months out of the air, and three months you're off, particularly given the nature of those three months, let's say you want to take off July in August and the month of December, you need you need a business, that's you probably in a business model is going to be project based, so that you can be off kind of offline for two months at a stretch. And so you could run run projects September through November and run other projects January through June, and not have to worry about July and August. Or if you want to write and that's if you want to be a solo. If you want to be part of a team, then maybe you want to have a small team that you you hire and you manage where the team can run everything for some period of time. And then other parts of the time you're going to be involved or you're involved for only certain things that really take advantage of your skill set and your team members take care of other things. Like again, a lot of his personal preference. There a lot of different ways to make money with your expertise. So I would say you got to be really clear on on what it is you want cuz I See many people, they develop a business based on what they think they should do. But they see others doing what they see other how they see others being successful. And they try to copy that. And then they realize, well, I've just built myself a glorified job. It's not really what I want.

**[15:16]**

And I'm my own boss, and I realized that I suck is about

**[15:19]**

Yeah, exactly. So you got to understand what it is you want. There are a lot of ways to make money, you can coach you can consult, you could you could do paid speaking, there are people that make money just from blogging, right, they have a successful blog, all they do is blog. And they have, you know, they have affiliate marketing as part of their blog or sponsorships. And, and you can actually make a nice living if you do that

really well. But again, you got to know what what it is you want. Some people make money from events, like conferences and summits, some people run memberships and peer support groups. Some of them sell digital products, you know, like online courses, some people make a lot of money from from joint ventures, you know, where you you cross refer? Again, it's a personal preference.

**[16:04]**

Yeah. Are there anything beyond just kind of personal preference, any any qualities or things that you see in folks that have done particularly well, either going down more of the sort of solopreneur route, like really optimizing, you know, schedule, and billing rates and times versus those that actually put together teams and actually create more of a scaled business around things, anything in terms of, you know, their skills, their background, their mindset, any any indicators that would that you would sort of advise somebody saying, hey, look, I would recommend this route, or I would start thinking about this route versus this route, at least to begin with.

**[16:39]**

Yeah, first, first is don't sell your time. Right. And I honestly, I made this mistake right out of the gate, my right at the very beginning, I'm remember, I got a really great project that was referred to me. And, and I charge a daily rate. And I made good money with this project as well. But but it's a it's limiting. And B, there's a conflict of interest with the client, right? Because it's limiting, because you only have so many hours that you can actually work and Bill. And the conflict of interest is, if you're charging by the hour, or by the day, as a consultant, it's in your interest, your financial interest for the number of hours to be high. And for the client, it's in their interest for the number of hours to be low. And if you're there to solve a problem with your expertise, and and they have a problem, you want them to reach out to you when they notice something that you don't see, because it'll help solve the problem faster. So you don't want them to hesitate because the the meters running when they pick up the phone, or send you an email. And, and again, you don't want that conflict of interest. So number one, don't sell your time, sell value. And, you know, if you have all of these years of expertise that you have developed, you may be able to solve a problem really quickly because of that. And that could be very valuable to the client. So think about how much more money or how much more profit the client is going to make, because of your help. Think about how much time you're going to save them think about the money, you'll save them, because you're not going to go down a rabbit hole of mistakes. Those are the ways that you can you can you can measure the value of what you produce for many clients, especially if you're building up a long term relationship as a consultant, peace of mind, and trust end up being really huge. So I have clients that I work with, that I've worked with for years. And there are some months when there's a lot of work. And there's some months where there's relatively little work, but the fact that they know that they can pick up the phone and call me when they have a problem. And they're not sure who else to call, and I can help them. That's worth a lot to them.

**[18:51]**

Yeah. Yeah. And for those folks that it gets, who do you see? Or what kind of situations do you see? Having the ability to actually scale into, you know, organization with teams and you know, more people involved and things like that? Is there anything that you kind of notice, either in terms of the person or the types of business?

**[19:08]**

Um, yeah, so when you so it's actually it's like, you know, the book, the E Myth. When you first start out as a consultant, if you're solo, you're the practitioner, you're actually the one who's delivering the goods, right? If so, if you if the model that you want to develop is the agency model, where you end up becoming the senior

person and you're hiring all these people underneath you to do the work. Your own role has to shift from practitioner to manager to different skill set. And you're going to be basically in the Talent Recruitment business because you want to get the best talent on your team to be able to deliver quality results to your clients. And your job ends up becoming primarily manager and Rainmaker. It right so if that's something that you want, that's great, but if that's not the role you want or it's not your skill set, then you may want to think twice about it.

**[20:00]**

Yeah, what are some of the types of industries or types of consulting businesses that you, you know, end up focusing on or people that you've worked with or had on the podcast? Give me a sense of the range? Or maybe some of the more interesting ones?

**[20:11]**

Yeah, I would say they pretty much cover a really wide array of industries. Our niche is really, folks that have deep expertise that have worked a long time in some kind of organizational environment, whether it's corporate or the nonprofit sector, or even some who have worked for other bigger consulting firms. And then at some point, there's a there's a trigger that causes them to go out on their own. And then they have to develop their own business, and they have to run their own business. So yeah, so our, our niche is really not industry agnostic. It's really about that transition and transformation that an expert goes through from being an employee to being an entrepreneur.

**[20:56]**

Yeah. And I'm curious about the podcast, I mean, I mean, I on your, your own experience with pockets, because I know a lot of sort of solopreneur experts, and even, you know, some of these service companies that have really done well with kind of podcasting as a content marketing, you know, lead generation strategy. And why podcasting? How have you seen this help you? Is this something that you recommend for a lot of your clients? Or how are the folks that you work with? What's What's your take on

**[21:25]**

it? Yeah, so my recommendation when it comes to content creation is be prepared to work at it for a long period of time. I tell people, there are three ingredients that are most important consistency, frequency, and quality. And in that order, too many people get hung up on the quality and they're afraid to release the first blog post or the first podcast episode or the first video cast. If you're not embarrassed by the first episode you released, you waited too long. Exactly. Right. So so be prepared. This is this is a long haul. This is about you becoming known for something, something in particular. So that's number one. Second is pick your channel. Like for me, I happen to like podcasting. Because I like talking to people one on one. I like meeting new people. I'm curious, I love asking questions. And I like the audio format. So actually, we don't use video, we've only used audio for for the whole seven years that I've been podcasting. And for me, that works just fine. And we've produced episodes every single week for a now it's almost eight years. So it's again it and does the podcast is that every single episode produce leads? No, I would say the most important thing is it builds relationships with the guests. And it builds relationships with the audience. Yeah. So think about your think about your channel, what's easy for you pick one, go deepen that one. If you like writing, maybe maybe you know blogs, or now you can do a great job with LinkedIn newsletters, maybe just do a LinkedIn newsletter consistently, try one go deep in it. Second thing that's that's really important, is pick something that is as narrow as possible. You know, like when I started podcasting, our show was much more general than it is now. And again, podcasting was very different seven, eight years ago than it is now. But but now we have a very narrow niche, which is your, you know, a basically age 50. Plus, you have deep expertise, and you're going from being

an employee to being a consultant. Yeah, that's pretty, that's pretty narrow. And there's a very specific set of problems that we address. And the same thing, when you're, again, with your content, think about what's a narrow problem and a narrow slice of the type of audience that you can address. And just keep doing that consistently, you'll be an even if you don't know a whole lot about the subject, when you start by the time you finish. If you do a lot of research, and you have a lot of discussions with individuals and you do interviews, you'll be surprised how much you know, after a period of time.

**[23:50]**

So you mentioned this a couple times this idea of focus, or if you're finding a niche, like how I would I guess define kind of a niche for me when you're working with folks or when you're kind of thinking about, particularly the solopreneur or expert kind of solopreneur? And how I guess how narrow does that need to be? How does one find that? Because I think that I agree, but I think it's always a challenge for folks to really figure that out. It is

**[24:14]**

very much a challenge, the best way to do it is actually to do market research, you know, have a hypothesis. I have a client that does writing for non native English executives. Interesting, right? That's a pretty narrow niche. And this is somebody who's really talented could write for all, you know, all kinds of could write books could write web content, but in terms of what you're being known for, in your marketing, pick something really narrow because people will understand that and they'll either know they're in or they're out.

**[24:43]**

Yeah. And what are some of the steps they do the market research and then how what are some good evidence that your validate is it like literally people are hiring you with money is there like what are some of the things that that tell you you're on the right track?

**[24:56]**

Yeah, people hiring you with money is really great. That's a great metric. Got the bank? Yeah. Yeah, I'll give you an example. We started a paid membership community for consultants that have a long history of working first as an employee. Yeah. And honestly, we did plenty of market research. The podcasts alone are plenty of market research. And many, many people told me Oh, yeah, this is something that's needed. We all feel so alone. We would really love to be able to, you know, get feedback on what we're doing be in a safe place that it i And did I know for sure that this was gonna work before people actually signed up and paid money for it now, you don't know till the cash is in the bank?

**[25:34]**

Yeah. Well, then people can say they're going to buy something, but you don't know if they're actually going to buy.

**[25:39]**

Exactly. I'm sure you've experienced this many times, too. Yes.

**[25:43]**

A lot of a lot of a lot of good intentions, but a lot of tire kickers. Yeah, exactly. David, this has been a pleasure. If people want to find out more about you about the podcast, what's the best way to get that information,



**[25:54]**

smashing the plateau.com that's where both podcasts are you can learn about our membership community there. You can get in touch with me there. I'm also pretty active on LinkedIn. I am the only David Shriner con in the world. Pretty easy to find. And since we produce a lot of content, if you search my name, you'll find me really quickly.

**[26:11]**

Yeah, so I'll make sure that the the links and your LinkedIn profile are on the shownotes people can get that information. Highly encourage everyone to check it out. David, thank you so much for taking the time today. It's been a pleasure. Thank you, Bruce.

**[26:23]**

Thank you for tuning in to today's episode. Be sure to subscribe using your favorite podcast app, so you don't miss our future episodes. See you next time.

**[26:33]**

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## **About Scaling Up Services**

Scaling Up Services is a podcast devoted to helping founders, partners, CEOs, key executives, and managers of service-based businesses scale their companies faster and with less drama.

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