

## Leading into the Unknown

### Ep. 4—Porter Braswell, CEO of Jopwell: Why every company should be focused on DEI, no matter their size

**Narrator:** [00:00:07] Welcome to Leading into the Unknown. A podcast by SYPartners featuring stories from leaders we admire about creating the path forward in complex times.

[Music]

**Andy Ng:** [00:00:21] Hi, I'm Andy Ng from SYPartners. Today, I am joined by my good friend Porter Braswell, CEO and Founder of Jopwell. Thanks for being here, Porter.

**Porter Braswell:** [00:00:29] Pleasure to be here.

**Andy Ng:** [00:00:31] I'm excited to talk to you because obviously Jopwell has received a lot of great coverage in the news lately, starting a really crucial conversation across industries. It really impacts so many different managers, employers, and definitely people who are thinking about where they want to land next in their career. So you and your co-founder Ryan Williams left your jobs at Goldman Sachs to start this company. For listeners who might not be familiar with what Jopwell is or does, could you speak about that?

**Porter Braswell:** [00:01:00] Absolutely. Jopwell is a career advancement platform built specifically for Black, Latinx, and Native American students and professionals. And on one side of the platform, we have users. They create profiles, they tell us who they are, what their interests are, they can write personal statements; we capture a lot of different information. And then from their profile, we can surface them relevant jobs, content, events, things that relate to who they are, and where they want to be. On the other side we work with companies and surface relevant candidates that fit their requirements. And we also have account managers that connect both sides.

**Andy Ng:** [00:01:37] And I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about the inspiration for Jopwell.

**Porter Braswell:** [00:01:41] Well let's see, so the story really kicks off where when I was in high school, my parents told me to be "successful"—and I put air quotes around that—you have to be a doctor, you have to be a lawyer, you can go into finance, and that's basically it. And so, I went to a

prep school called Lawrenceville, and at the time Morgan Stanley was offering a diversity internship program for high school students. I got lucky, I applied, and I got the job. And so I started working there my junior and senior summers in high school, went on to Yale and I played basketball there. I continued in a really entry-level diversity focused pipeline, and spent three summers interning at Goldman Sachs and started my career there. Now I was there for three years, and while my day-to-day job was to buy and sell currencies, I'd still assist with diversity recruiting efforts, being one of the few people of color on the floor. My background was in D&I [diversity and inclusion], and it was something I was passionate about. And when I saw, kind of, the inefficiencies that occurred when it came to diversity recruiting—not necessarily at Goldman Sachs, but companies all over the country in different industries— and the pain points that they were experiencing, it struck me that there wasn't a solution to address those pain points. And so, my co-founder and I decided, you know we have the experience, we have the passion for it, and we think that we can make a lot of impact if we were to build a large, scalable, tech driven platform to connect, specifically, Black, Latinx, and Native American students and professionals to opportunities.

**Andy Ng:** [00:03:07] Nice. So, you have mentioned in other interviews that you've done that your family was maybe not as supportive of your decision to leave your job at Goldman and pursue this career in entrepreneurship. Of course, there's so many different unknowns, a lot of variables, was it your intuition that led you to think, Jopwell is going to be successful. This is the right thing for me to do now.

**Porter Braswell:** [00:03:29] Yeah, so my parents basically looked at me and said, "Listen: you are in an amazing seat right now. There are a lot of people that would love to be where you are. You're doing very well. Why would you want to change that up?" And my dad was the first person in his family to go to college; he became a lawyer, then became a general counsel, and so his path to success was sticking it out in corporate America. And my mom also had a very successful career being a teacher and she was a teacher for about 20 years. And so that mindset is one of, you get the job and and you do that job, and that's your life. And it's just different.

[00:04:07] So when I told my parents that I wanted to do something a little bit more entrepreneurial, something that I felt I could make a little bit more direct impact, and that I wanted it to be around diversity and inclusion, they basically looked at me and said, "Okay, so let me get this straight. You're non-technical. You have never built a business before. You've never done recruiting before. That's what you want to do." I was like, "That's exactly what I want to do!" And so, it's really awkward when

you look up to these people who love you and they tell you, "You're making a bad decision, do not do that" and you still do it. That was the first time in my life where I basically went against my parent's wishes for me, and it truly makes you know that what you're about to do can't fail. Every single bone in your body has to be pulling you towards this opportunity. And I think when you are trying to solve a real problem that you are an expert in because you've experienced it, whatever that may be, you have to follow that thing inside of you telling you you've got to go forward and solve it. And so, you know, despite my parents saying that, I had to listen to my gut, and thankfully I did.

**Andy Ng:** [00:05:18] Yeah, definitely. What you did required not just passion, but also grit, and a lot of perseverance to sort of listen to folks who may not have been supportive in the moment, but feel like, you know what, this is worthwhile.

**Porter Braswell:** [00:05:31] Yeah.

**Andy Ng:** [00:05:32] So Jopwell is focused on this conversation around diversity, equity, and inclusion. So, to me, these are of course interrelated, but the three terms are uniquely different as well. And a lot of leaders are now starting to come forth to say, we care about these issues, but sometimes they don't necessarily know how to define them. So, I'm wondering, can you define what is diversity, what is equity, and what is inclusion?

**Porter Braswell:** [00:06:00] So I think what the challenge is around this conversation: you have a lot of leaders coming out and saying, we value diversity, we value inclusion. It's easy to say that. And what's more difficult is to actually define it. And so, when people speak about diversity, they generally are lumping together women, LGBTQ, ethnic minorities, socioeconomic backgrounds, diversity of thought, in some cases. And to me, that's not going to solve anything if that's how you're defining diversity. For Jopwell, we define diversity—specifically for what we're focusing on—as the most underrepresented groups in corporate America, which to us are Black, Latinx, and Native American students and professionals. And so, we are loud about that, we're proud about that, and that's the community in which we've decided to serve. We're from that community, and we know the pain points. And so, because we're able to be very clearly defined on who we're servicing, we can drive impact.

[00:07:00] And so, I think when companies are willing to embrace uncomfortable conversations around what diversity means for them, and identify the vertical within that umbrella, they can find

success. And similarly, when you think about inclusion and building a more inclusive workforce, like what does that mean? And so, when I know that a company is inclusive, it is when employees feel like they can bring their authentic selves to work and not leave who they are at home from 9-to-6. And so, what are companies doing publicly that demonstrate that they welcome those conversations? If something's going on in the community, and it's a national conversation, be it around politics or police shootings or whatever the case may be, is there a safe space within that organization to host those conversations? And if there is not, to me that's not an inclusive workforce.

**Andy Ng:** [00:07:53] Yes. And what about equity?

**Porter Braswell:** [00:07:55] So again, I think that means a lot, and to many organizations it's hard to kind of pin it down. I think that you have to look at an organization, the stage that organization is in, what policies and procedures and hierarchy they have in place. How are they ensuring that everybody is receiving fair treatment and how are you tracking that? And so, the larger organizations, there's more structure and there's more reporting that goes on to ensure that everybody's receiving equal opportunities. And as you kind of scale down to the startup level, I don't know what that means for a team of 10 folks, right. So it's a wide ranging thing, but I think each company needs to clearly be able to define what that means for their organization at the stage that they're in.

**Andy Ng:** [00:08:45] Yeah definitely. I feel like in general, there's some hesitation to try to get this stuff right the first time.

**Porter Braswell:** [00:08:51] Yeah.

**Andy Ng:** [00:08:51] And it's not like that at all, it's a huge process. And even once you maybe figure out what your definition is for your organization, or figure out what sort of vertical or sort of metric you want to focus on, it's still a daily process of making sure and checking in to see, is this the right thing that I'm focusing on?

**Porter Braswell:** [00:09:07] Absolutely. And so that raises a really interesting point, in that a lot of the difficulty when it comes to the conversation around diversity and inclusion is that there are a lot of people who want to point fingers and say like, "You know, what the hell, what are you doing, things haven't changed." Well, it didn't take you overnight to get to where you are. And it's not going to take

you overnight to kind of fix where you are. And so this has to be the evolution of a business moving forward that D&I is going to be built into their DNA, and it's going to take time. And so, while companies want to be more inclusive, build more diverse workforces, and be more equitable across the board, they have to prepare their employees that this is going to take time, and have to be honest and open about that.

**Andy Ng:** [00:09:47] I used to work in the tech industry and folks would often say, "Well, it's a pipeline problem," or, "We don't have the right leadership," or, "We're struggling to retain new employees." But the fact is, you might say at the start of a year you want to hire X Y Z from this demographic, but then that also requires that you have to go recruit those people, you have to make sure that the environment is actually set up for their success, and it's a lot of behavior change, getting people to understand that this is important as well.

**Porter Braswell:** [00:10:14] Absolutely.

**Andy Ng:** [00:10:15] Jopwell employees are more than 50 percent female, and over 70 percent people of color. I'm wondering can you speak about the approach you've taken to building your team as the company also grows?

**Porter Braswell:** [00:10:27] Not to oversimplify it, but we believe Jopwell should represent what this country looks like, especially what New York City looks like. And so, we practice what we preach. Diversity is a cornerstone within our organization. We have more women than we do men, the largest ethnicity is African-American within the firm. And we know that in order to build the most successful company possible, we have to have the most diverse workforce possible. We need all of those individuals with those differing backgrounds to come to the table to look at these challenges in a way that maybe others aren't looking at it. And so for us, we're very intentional about how we grow the company and we want to always be a leader in this space because we never want somebody to say the talent doesn't exist, or it's impossible to build a tech company with a more diverse workforce.

**Andy Ng:** [00:11:18] Definitely. So, at SYPartners, we're seeing forward-thinking leaders make diversity, equity, and inclusion, or DEI, a priority. But this isn't the case across the board. What would you say to a leader who wants to make internal diversity a priority, but is maybe facing resistance from their colleagues, leadership team, or even customers or user base?

**Porter Braswell:** [00:11:39] Yeah, that's a really challenging place to be, if you are the one banging the table for building a more diverse and inclusive workforce and you're getting pushback. What I think is the way to get out of that situation is to stick to the facts. And so, the fact of the matter is that building a more diverse and inclusive workforce leads to bottom line success. In addition to the McKinsey report that came out to say that more diverse organizations better financially outperform their less diverse peers, Deloitte also came out with a study that said over 70 percent of respondents claim that having a more diverse and inclusive workforce was a large factor in whether or not they decided to stay or leave their current employer. And so, I think that by sticking to the facts around why diversity is a business imperative you'll get a more receptive audience. I think what occurs far too often in this diversity and inclusion conversation is that people want to make it feel good, like we should be paying for this from the nonprofit arm or the foundation arm of the business. This is a human capital challenge. For those diversity champions, it's that they're not armed with the facts. And when making a pitch to senior leadership, or senior leadership making a pitch to the organization, about why they're going to prioritize diversity, sticking to the facts around why this is good for the workforce, that's the best way to approach when you have obstacles pertaining to wanting to build a more diverse and inclusive workforce.

**Andy Ng:** [00:13:12] Makes sense. So Jopwell first started working with larger, established companies but now you're starting to expand to help smaller and younger companies diversify their workforces as well. What do you think is the force behind the shifting mindset amongst founders and CEOs?

**Porter Braswell:** [00:13:28] Yeah. So I think what has occurred in kind of like, the arc of this conversation around D&I is, let's start it with the summer of 2014. At that time, all of the large tech companies came out with their lack of diversity stats, which is something we all knew, but it was the first time that they were public about it. And that sparked a lot of interesting conversations around why diversity matters, how should companies go about solving that challenge, and now over the course of the last four years or so, it's become so ingrained in the startup culture that you better get it right when you're five employees or when you're 10 employees, because if you're not thinking about it at that stage, by the time you're a thousand... good luck.

**Andy Ng:** [00:14:07] When you're working with early stage founders for example, sometimes the priority for them is marketing, or trying to get seed funding, or focused on their product development. So issues of teaming and talent sometimes fall to the wayside. So in some ways you're

also emphasizing those things are just as important as what you're selling to your customers or what you're building to?

**Porter Braswell:** [00:14:28] So I would say, it's more important. And the reason why I think a lot of companies fail early on, is because they're so focused on going out and getting funding. And I think what a lot of founders miss the point of is that funding is purely an outcome of building a good business, and it's the funding that will accelerate that good business. And in order to build that good business, you have to have great employees. And so it starts with employees, then it goes to building a good business, and then funding is an outcome. And too many founders get that wrong, and they try to build something that they think can get funding.

**Andy Ng:** [00:15:01] Brilliant. So Porter, you and I both know that we are living in very trying, complicated times, and here at SYP we think that effective leadership in this moment really requires optimism, communicating authentically, creativity, and also humanity. Which of these do you think come to you naturally?

**Porter Braswell:** [00:15:21] I would say in my day-to-day, humanity I'm a product of this community. I've lived through the pain points that we're trying to address, and I've personally experienced a lot of different challenges in life as a result of being a Black male in this country.

**Andy Ng:** [00:15:40] What are ways that a leader can practice a skill like humanity?

**Porter Braswell:** [00:15:44] I think it's treating everybody like you would want to be treated. It's not complicated. And when you are sitting next to a colleague that might be different, you don't have to like, call out the differences. You just have to connect with that individual. Take him out for lunch. Have a conversation. Find where there are similarities, because there will be similarities. And so, I think that people feel so awkward sometimes when they are around people that aren't like them from the outside, they create obstacles that allow them to get to know that individual on a personal level.

**Andy Ng:** [00:16:14] Yeah I love that. So among the many things that you are always doing, in January 2019 you are releasing a book.

**Porter Braswell:** [00:16:25] Yeah!

**Andy Ng:** [00:16:25] It's titled, *Let them See You*. So excited about this. What was your inspiration behind the book?

**Porter Braswell:** [00:16:32] So in similar fashion to what propelled me to launch Jopwell, of this internal gut feeling that told me I have to do this business, it's necessary, writing this book was a similar feeling. So twice a month on Fridays I block out my days and I only speak to Jopwell users. And you know, everyday I get reached out to by users saying, "I'd love to ask you this question, how have you done this, how have you done that?" And so I make it a priority to do that twice a month. And throughout those conversations over the last three years, and remembering when I was an employee am looking for a mentor—I still have mentors of course—those questions are all the same questions. And so when I saw that everybody was thinking the same things, they had the same fears, and those questions were similar across the board, I said, "Okay, there has to be a way to address this at scale." And that "at scale" for me was, I should write a book. And really what the book is, it's about speaking to professionals of color, typically you're entry to mid level somewhere in that phase, college students as well, and being the honest mentor that they're going to need. And so the book is advice to those individuals for how to succeed in corporate America, while being a person of color. And what I think is really important about the book is that it's also meant for those diversity champions, who are probably a part of the majority folks, to allow them to listen in on this intimate conversation so that they can have more empathy towards what professionals of color are experiencing, so they can be champions as well.

**Andy Ng:** [00:18:10] The title really speaks out to me too: *Let Them See You*. The idea of visibility, presence, just acknowledgement and recognition is so critical.

[00:18:20] Porter, can I ask you some rapid fire questions?

**Porter Braswell:** [00:18:23] Fire them off.

**Andy Ng:** [00:18:25] This might be hard for you to imagine, but if you weren't building Jopwell, what alternative career would you have, or like to try?

**Porter Braswell:** [00:18:33] It's always been a fantasy of mine to travel around the world on an incredibly limited budget and to figure it out wherever I am, on how to survive. And so I think if I wasn't doing Jopwell I would be probably somewhere in Bali building a surfing company.

**Andy Ng:** [00:18:51] I love that, with a map? No map? Would you just figure it out?

**Porter Braswell:** [00:18:54] I would love to learn how to read a map along the journey.

**Andy Ng:** [00:18:56] (Laughs) I think that's a really good goal. Recent book or movie that has really impacted you?

**Porter Braswell:** [00:19:02] The last book I read was Richard Branson's Losing My Virginity. Just interesting to see how he's been able to craft this unique journey and build an empire while doing business his way.

**Andy Ng:** [00:19:16] Could you share what you are most looking forward to in 2019?

**Porter Braswell:** [00:19:21] I think what I'm most looking forward to is that Jopwell is now at a place where we've built a very healthy, sustainable business, and as a result of that, we can truly craft our narrative moving forward. It's taken us now coming up on four years to have the ability to know who we are, and that ultimate vision that Ryan and I had when we first started the business is starting to play out, and I think 2019 will be the year where it all kind of comes together.

**Andy Ng:** [00:19:48] Love that. Porter, I'm really grateful to know you. Thank you for sharing your wisdom with us.

**Porter Braswell:** [00:19:52] Really enjoyed the conversation and thank you for having me, I appreciate it.