Sara Sladky (00:11)
Welcome everyone to The Accel Advantage podcast, where we discuss insurance and financial services. Whether you're a business owner, a family planning for the future, or just curious about the latest industry trends, we've got you covered. I'm your host, Sara Sladky, and here today with me is Josh Budke, President of Benefits and Financial Services, and Corey Rekers, President of Property and Casualty Insurance at The Accel Group and Accel Wealth Management. So today we're here to introduce you to Accel.

But before we do that, Josh and Corey, I think it would be appropriate to share a little bit about yourselves to get to know you just a little bit better and actually how you ended up in your respective industries. So Josh, I'm gonna put you in the hot seat first to tell us a little bit about yourself and kind of how you ended up where you are today.

Josh Budke (00:56)
Sounds good. Thanks, Sara. So a little bit about myself. Born, raised Cedar Falls, Iowa. Had the opportunity to attend and graduate from the University of Iowa. However, I did obtain my business management degree, but spent most of my time trying to wrestle and found myself at graduation very unprepared for the real world. No resume, no experience.

And started looking into possible careers with an upcoming marriage on the way to my high school sweetheart and realized I needed a job. So I ended up selling individual health insurance, a little bit of individual life insurance for about the first year post-graduation. And that was very eye opening. Looking at jobs, I very much did not want to be in sales, did not want to...

talk on the phone or meet with people. And so that's exactly what I ended up doing. Just a couple of funny, kind of moments, individual health insurance, trying to obtain leads. I would hang an 800 number on telephone poles and the old tear offs for those of you that haven't seen those, the grocery stores used to have bulletin boards. You'd put your information about affordable health insurance and your number on that.

So I would go all over Iowa, putting those up and hoping people would call. And so it was really kind of a crash course into sales. About a year into that, I decided that was really not for me long-term, ended up moving, started working for an independent brokerage on the health insurance, really the group employer side, where I spent a little over 16, almost 17 years. Towards the end of that

portion of my career, I ended up managing the entire benefits department-recruiting, training, working with clients. Now I've had the opportunity to be at Accel a little over five years now. So that puts me 20 years plus in the insurance industry, which is wild, but it has been a great journey. I have the privilege of being on the board, shareholder, continue to work with great teams here at Accel and

Really excited for the opportunity to talk a little bit further with you and Corey today, Sara.

Sara Sladky (03:18)
Yeah, that's quite the difference, just thinking about 20 some years ago and putting out a flyer with a pull tab. think maybe that does still exist, but maybe it looks a little bit more like QR codes and stuff like that now. But yeah, that's quite the journey just to kind of see, one, how the industry has changed, but also how your journey has changed in that too. Really cool. Corey, share a little bit about your experience and how you kind of got here!

Corey Rekers (03:43)
Yeah, thanks Sara. No, I thought I had it bad until I listened to that story there with the pull tabs. So yeah, I do remember those, Josh, actually pretty, pretty well. And I think in some grocery stores and places like that, I think they still exist actually. It's... tell you to go back, that's right. So, so yeah, my, my story stems back into the late nineties. While at the University of Iowa, I had a professor there who took an interest in me.

Sara Sladky (03:58)
It's too late to go back.

Corey Rekers (04:13)
I was able to get me an internship at a company called Life

which is well known here in the Cedar Rapids community as Transamerica. There I was able to learn how their products were made, got to spend some time in actuarial. I learned very quickly, that is not my forte. I had the opportunity to build insurance forms. I got a little bit of stint in their claims department.

I think what helped me the most though during that internship was my time in their Tiger School. I got to spend time with the sales leadership, other advisors coming into the life insurance industry. And looking back, it was probably the, easily the most exciting part of my internship. And it wasn't until maybe years later, I realized that sales probably

was my calling and kind of where I truly belonged. because I didn't really have a lot of awareness during school, for what should have been a pretty clear sign that I had found something that really fit, I did fight that and instead pursued my personal passion for fitness and became a membership director, much to the frustration of my mom and dad at a health club. So.

After two years of personal training and eventually getting the opportunity to run that gym, was very fortunate that a member saw my potential on the sales side and got me an interview with a very large national insurance company. So that's where I was able to kind of build a passion for helping business owners for the next 14 years, I've worked with business owners on their business insurance, health insurance.

for the employees, advising them on business succession planning, estate planning, and the latter part of my time there, I spent a lot of my time recruiting, training, and developing advisors on my own before coming here to The Accel Group back in 2018, So when I got here, got my start as a Business Solutions Advisor.

I was fortunate to make partner in 2019, became our sales team lead and then our Director of Sales. And then most recently last year became the President of the property and casualty division. So looking back, I've got, what is it? 22 years now in this wonderful industry, majority of that time in sales, sales leadership, recruiting, training, development. So the industry has been really, really

good to me and just very fortunate to have the mentors in my life that took an interest in my development and poured their knowledge into me like they did. It's something that we spend a lot of time here at Accel talking about how we can give back to the next generation of leaders who are coming into our industry so that they have that same positive experience that Josh and I have had so far. yeah, and we don't have to pull,

have pull tabs anymore. Yeah, come a long way. Haven't we, Josh?

Sara Sladky (07:06)
Yeah. That's so great. Yeah.

It's so interesting. What I was going to say was that both of you kind of shared whether you had a mentor or a person who sought you out to be in this industry or provided you an opportunity. Maybe when you were thinking back to your senior year of college self, you weren't

anticipating ending up in the insurance industry. But I'd love to hear a little bit more about why these industries, insurance and financial services respectively, have become so important to you. You both have had a personal encounter as to why

insurance and financial service has had an impact on you or why you're proud to be a part of these industries. So I'd love to hear that because that's really meaningful and probably an encouragement to you as you do the daily work that you're doing.

Josh Budke (07:54)
And it's a great question, Sara, just as you look at just myself and Corey again, 20 plus years in this, where I was going to talk about how old Corey's gotten, but we actually graduated the same year and

Sara Sladky (08:07)
Right, I

was like, I'm pretty sure you guys graduated the same year. I love it.

Corey Rekers (08:09)
We did, didn't we? You're correct. We did graduate in the same year.

Josh Budke (08:09)
Yeah, we, we did actually,

had some fellow or some mutual clients along the way before our paths crossed here at Accel, but that may be another podcast we can talk about about that. But

Sara Sladky (08:20)
That's super cool. Right.

Josh Budke (08:24)
Insurance, I would tell you, and I think it sums up one of my first mentors- basically he said it's an awful job. It can be a wonderful career. And really the point was from the day to day perspective, there are issues. There's a lot of fires to put out like literally and figuratively just in regards to service issues and in helping and advocating for your clients. So

the day to day can really be a grind. However, from a career perspective, you have the opportunity to meet with individuals and businesses and really see the importance and the impact that it has made. Years ago, I had the opportunity, Simon Sinek, for those that are familiar, talked about your why. And years ago, I had the opportunity to talk a little bit about my why in regards to specifically employee benefits, health insurance, its impact.

And the story that really hit me, and I remember it vividly, an individual at one of the companies that we insured, they were having a hard time getting a drug approved for their young daughter who was battling cancer. And just the sheer panic and concern, mom and dad trying to get this approved,

and walking through that with them, ultimately working with the insurance company, getting it approved. That little girl is doing very, very well to this day. That was a small, small piece of her journey. But however, to be part of that and to get some notes from the parents, from her and just to, again, be part of that journey

and see the impact both from a negative and positive perspective. It just again, really, really important. And there's lots of examples again of how businesses are able to overcome a disaster from one natural disaster to just again, lots and lots of examples there, but just reiterated the importance for me. And as I looked at it gave some meaning to where the day to day becomes that grind, as I mentioned.

Sara Sladky (10:31)
Mm-hmm.

Josh Budke (10:45)
but the overall importance.

Sara Sladky (10:45)
Right.

Yeah. What's cool about that story is that you really kind of saw the individual in that story by advocating and working alongside of the parent and maybe some uncharted water, obviously a pretty scary situation from a health perspective. Yeah, probably very unknown to really partner with the families to get what they need. And to your point, like such a healthy place now and to kind of see that whole story

from beginning to end, I'm sure it can be an encouragement and a reminder of like why you do what you do in the grind every day - it's, it's for stories like that. So yeah, that's really great. Josh, thanks for sharing that.

Corey Rekers (11:24)
I have a similar story with Josh in terms of, with, more on the health insurance side. My first experience with insurance really for me personally was back when I was 20 years old and I unfortunately was diagnosed with malignant melanoma, which is basically skin cancer on my left arm.

Because my mom and dad had great insurance, we had access to the Mayo Clinic. And so I remember being in Mayo pretty much immediately after my diagnosis. Luckily enough, I got the opportunity to get treated right away. So obviously, had we not been so fortunate to have access to that level of health care, I honestly don't know where I would

Sara Sladky (12:06)
Mm-hmm.

Corey Rekers (12:11)
be today. At a relatively young age, having insurance and valuing insurance was something that was kind of ingrained in me by my parents and to value coverage and to value that insurance. So, you know, fast forward,

Sara Sladky (12:20)
Mm-hmm.

Corey Rekers (12:30)
I was about four years into my career in the industry. I was able to kind of see the benefits of having good property insurance. Unfortunately, because of where my territory was, I got to see the F5 Parkersburg tornado back in May of 2008.

Sara Sladky (12:47)
Mm-hmm.

Corey Rekers (12:47)
And

so the insurance company I worked for at the time had a number of businesses that we insured in that community. And so I got to see how important it is to have, obviously, building limits, property limits, the importance of replacement costs versus maybe actual cash value. And so we watched a number of those small businesses be able to get back on their feet relatively quickly.

Sara Sladky (12:57)

Right.

Corey Rekers (13:07)
and then as of recently, you know, back in 2020 with the derecho... So it's really a unique impact you can have as a insurance professional. So when people are experiencing their worst, you do have that opportunity to be there at their most vulnerable time,

Sara Sladky (13:08)
Sure.

Corey Rekers (13:27)
and be some hope that things will work out and that they'll get through what could be one of the more difficult experiences that they've ever had. So it's just satisfying knowing that what we do really, it really does matter.

Sara Sladky (13:41)
I mean, there's hundreds of thousands of stories about how this industry really partners with its clients and really advocates for

people keep living their lives and contributing in the way that's meaningful to them. So I love that. And hopefully a few of our listeners are able to know you both a little bit more and kind of what drives you every day as you help lead our company to be supporting and making change. So I love that. So let's transition

Sara Sladky (14:05)
a little bit more about who we are and what we do, as well as why we've created this podcast space to connect with you, our listeners. At Accel, our mission is to Insure Your Moment by building meaningful relationships, providing trusted advice, and serving with care and excellence in all that we do. So this mission really influences the way we work and the service that we provide to our clients. So it really seems appropriate for our conversation to start with our roots and our beginning.

So Corey, could you share a little bit about the history of our agency?

Corey Rekers (14:34)
Yeah, our story really stems from the long success of two separate companies. You had the Millhiser-Smith Agency and The Accel Group. The Millhiser Agency was established back in 1928 by Harold Millhiser, and The Accel Group was originally founded in Waverly, Iowa by Wesley Young in 1936. So we officially merged obviously in 2018.

And obviously we've experienced several mergers, acquisitions, name changes over the years, but the mission really hasn't changed, Sara. We're truly dedicated, being a part of the communities that we serve. We provide business insurance, personal insurance, employee benefits, individual health insurance, Medicare supplements... We have an agribusiness department that is commercial agribusiness, crop and farm insurance, and then our financial services department.

That includes individual wealth management and also our 401(k) division, which obviously Josh heads up today. So we're very, very proud of our roots. Very, just, I guess it's pretty amazing, if you think about it, we're on the verge of our a hundred year anniversary. And so the fact that the, business continues to get passed on to the next generation and how important that is.

As we kind of serve the communities well beyond the entities that we have today, which is now eight locations in four states. Josh and I making sure that that legacy continues on with the people that we have here at The Accel Group.

It's something that we obviously are very, very proud of.

Sara Sladky (16:11)
Great. And I think there's a couple things I want to highlight too. One, you mentioned a little bit about our history and kind of our two agencies that came together out of Cedar Rapids and Waverly. So primarily we have been in the state of Iowa with offices in Cedar Falls, West Des Moines, Coralville, Cedar Rapids and Waverly. But we've grown to offices in Wichita, Kansas; St. Joseph, Missouri; and Moline, Illinois.

And then the second thing you mentioned, which I really kind of want to dive into for the next few minutes, is how or what it means to be a privately held independent agency.

Corey Rekers (16:46)
This is definitely something that gets confused. So we as an agency, we provide the power of choice for our customers. We work really hard as an agency to build relationships. We currently have part of over 140 US-based property and casualty insurance companies. And then through getting to know our clients,

through fact-finding sessions, learning the ins and outs of your business and the personalities and risk tolerances of our owners, we try to pair the right carrier with the right businesses. Okay? So you'll find that some carriers focus on certain types of businesses over others. Some are cost-effective with limited coverage, while others are rich in coverage and coverage options, but are maybe more on the higher value side. So

it becomes really important to find an agent who's willing to know your personal situation before picking the right insurance agent or the right insurance company, because that will really differ based on your individual situation and personal needs. That's what the agent does. So think of the middle person trying to match you with the right partner. So that's our job.

Now the insurance company's job is a little bit different. They're the ones that actually pay the insurance claims that the customers have. So we as agents don't do that. Okay, again, we are the ones finding you that right

partner.

Sara Sladky (18:14)
Wow, that's so great. And something as we talk about our mission and our vision and why we do what we do, it's a cornerstone of who we are. So I love that you highlighted that piece there, Corey. Okay, then we have this other piece we talked a little bit about, being privately held. So Josh, what does that mean for us as a company to be privately held? And why is that important, I guess, too?

Josh Budke (18:35)
So as I look at Accel, we have over 130 employees in our different communities. We've got 14 shareholders. So being privately held, I would say that that financial fiscal responsibility is just at a heightened level.

I look at as I've gotten older, the value and the importance of buying local, just, it's heightened for me, whether it's supporting the local coffee shop, the locally owned restaurant, the local business, just from the standpoint of keeping that business, that money within our communities. Again, just that heightened responsibility. And I would say that sense of care.

Being a privately held, independently owned and operated insurance agency brokerage is important to our shareholders. And again, we feel that responsibility to all of our people.

Sara Sladky (19:34)
Yeah, I really kind of want to dig into that a little bit deeper of like what that actually looks like, because you're right, we talked about our eight different office locations, that we have across the Midwest, 130 different employees. So when we say that we're locally invested and have local influence, this is actually kind of unique because of our multiple locations. Like we're not just talking about one community that we're involved in, we're talking about eight plus communities that we're involved in. So I think that's really important to highlight just that

that reach and that investment and that influence that exists with The Accel Group. And really a kudos to our shareholders and both of your leadership to kind of see where we can keep providing opportunities for us to grow into these different communities.

Josh Budke (20:16)
Being locally owned, being operated locally, again, super important, having the services, having the tools and resources that our clients need, I would say is equally as important. And so we do value having those, I'll call it world-class tools and resources for our clients. We know that's what they need, that's what they expect.

That was part of what drew me to join the Accel team was that local service, the importance of customer service and that the power of relationships, but also being able to have the tools and resources that our clients need and expect.

When you look at again being local, what does that mean, to your point? Attending local events- our kids are at the local schools, the associations... the businesses are part of attending those, the conferences. And just again, then the monetary and volunteer aspect of support.

Accel and our Foundation... passionate group of employees here that meet on an ongoing basis to look at what charitable organizations within each of our communities are of importance.

I've had the privilege of sitting on as a community member and looking at, again, the needs that need to be addressed. And so that's another area where just, again, having that awareness of the local organizations and their outreach to us, and then again, likewise, where we can give back.

Sara Sladky (21:54)
That's awesome. Yeah, we definitely see a great number of our employees taking advantage of opportunities to partner with organizations outside of ourselves and often work in ways to allow our employees to do that, whether it's volunteer time off or opportunities at your fingertips or ways to fundraise or have different events internally that work to support the Foundation and the work that they're doing.

Okay, well this is so great. until next time, Corey, maybe you'll leave us with some words of wisdom about how to get connected with us beyond the podcast here.

Corey Rekers (22:25)
no pressure words of wisdom, huh? thank you to the folks for listening. Please be sure to check us out at acceladvantage.com or accelwealthmanagement.com and follow us on Facebook, LinkedIn, and/ or Instagram. So be sure to subscribe so you don't miss out on our next episode and please feel free to share this with anybody who you think would benefit from learning more about some helpful insurance buying tips.

Sara Sladky (22:53)
At The Accel Group, we've been helping individuals and businesses protect what matters most for nearly 100 years, and that's The Accel Advantage.

Sara Sladky (23:10)

a marketing name for¬†Integrity Alliance, LLC. Accel Wealth Management is not affiliated with Integrity¬†Wealth.