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## A Discussion with Goodwill Industries International's Jim Gibbons



Jim Gibbons

Boyden's *Leadership Series* presents discussions with business and thought leaders from organizations across the globe. The series focuses on topical issues that offer executives, political leaders and the media insight into current trends in business and talent management in the global marketplace.

This issue features Jim Gibbons, President and Chief Executive Officer at Goodwill Industries International, Inc. In the interview, Gibbons discusses the power of work and employment inclusion, the strength of the social enterprise model, perspectives on talent recruitment and retention, the importance of organizational culture, and approaches to innovation.

Gibbons joined Goodwill Industries International as President and CEO in April 2008. Prior to Goodwill, he served as President and CEO of National Industries for the Blind (NIB), a United States-based nonprofit that, in partnership with more than 88 associated agencies nationwide, works to enhance economic opportunities and professional development for people with blindness.

Prior to joining NIB, Gibbons was President and CEO of Campus Wide Access Solutions, a wholly owned subsidiary of AT&T. Gibbons worked at AT&T for more than a decade, holding leadership positions in operations, product management, and mergers and acquisitions.

Gibbons has served on the Harvard Business School Alumni Association Board of Directors, and is a board member of the Credential Engine, the Independent Sector, the National Workforce Solutions Advisory Board, sponsored by ACT, Inc. and DocuSign.

Gibbons has received several awards and recognitions for his work, including the National Jefferson Award for Greatest Public Service Benefiting the Disadvantaged, SmartCEO EcoCEO award for organizational commitment to the environment, Young

Presidents' Organization Social Enterprise Leadership Award, and the Purdue Outstanding Industrial Engineer of the Year award. In 2010 Gibbons was appointed by President Barack Obama as a member of the White House Council for Community Solutions.

He earned his B.S. in Industrial Engineering from Purdue University, and was the first blind person ever awarded an MBA from Harvard Business School.

**Boyden:** You have been at Goodwill Industries International for over nine years now. When you first began your career at Goodwill, what were your expectations?

**Gibbons:** When I first joined Goodwill, I was certainly infatuated with the brand and excited by the model. However, over the course of my first year or two at the company, that infatuation transformed into love and my excitement for the company's mission and model accelerated.

Goodwill is a company that lives in your heart and your head because of its social enterprise model. While the company proclaims a passion for doing good, it is also built upon a sustainable model leveraging enterprise to have impact.

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Given my background in engineering and MBA, this combination of social commitment and corporate enterprise piqued my interest.

**Boyden:** Before joining Goodwill, you served as President and CEO of National Industries for the Blind. How did your experience there prepare you for your tenure at Goodwill?

**Gibbons:** Prior to joining NIB, I worked in a variety of product management, operations, and mergers and acquisitions jobs with AT&T in the technology and telecommunications space, eventually rising to become the president of a wholly owned subsidiary. While working in that role, I received a call regarding the opportunity at NIB. Upon learning about NIB and their work, I was inspired by the organization and its commitment to using business to positively impact the lives of people who are blind.

Though I had not previously been familiar with the concept of social enterprise, I became interested in NIB's facilitation of a network of social enterprises focused on the employment of people who are blind.

The network model that drove NIB's business translated seamlessly to Goodwill Industries International, which is a network of independent Goodwills that are responsible to their individual boards of directors, who in turn are responsible to their communities. The challenge that arises when leading such a business is how to lead effectively without a great deal of authority but with much responsibility. To navigate this, I had to draw upon lessons from early in my career when I was working as a product quality manager.

In this role, I had to lead cross-functional groups that I did not have authority over. To do so, I emphasized skills of collaboration and communication to unite all of the various pieces and propel them forward together.

I am constantly recalling these skills and utilizing them to unite the various independent Goodwills to strive to achieve collective goals.

**Boyden:** Considering your careers at NIB and Goodwill, how did your own visual impairment impact your perception of economic and employment inclusion?

**Gibbons:** The Goodwill mission certainly resonates with me. When I was graduating from Purdue University, where I studied industrial engineering, I struggled to find a job despite the fact that I had good grades and my friends were all receiving job offers. I attended about 50 interviews and received 50 rejection letters. I eventually received offers from both IBM and AT&T. It took a large company to be willing to take a chance on the young blind engineer.

When I later joined NIB and then Goodwill, I began to more fully understand the important role that a job plays in all of our lives and the struggle that people with disabilities face when it comes to employment. A job is part of our identity and it fuels economic and personal independence, goals that everyone should be able to attain.

Goodwill works to make that happen, which I find inspiring. Every time I meet someone that Goodwill serves, my personal passion for the power of work and belief in the Goodwill model is reinforced.

**Boyden:** Following the recent hurricanes, Goodwill launched several programs to support relief efforts. How were these programs initiated and how did they leverage Goodwill's business model and mission?

**Gibbons:** The mission of Goodwill revolves around the power of work and our social enterprise model of retail, which serves as

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both a mission delivery vehicle and an economic engine for mission activities. This model allows us to fuel our ultimate, underlying objective, which is to support people in their quest for independence.

As part of this model, we have a deep infrastructure built on donated goods. This line of business becomes increasingly relevant during times of disaster when people are driven to donate materials. We have a successful business model for collecting donated items, but we are not geared to function as a disaster relief organization. Conversely, the Red Cross is a disaster recovery organization, but challenged when it comes to bringing in goods.

To combat these challenges and complement one another's strengths, the independent Florida Goodwill organizations combined forces in recent months and partnered with the Red Cross. The Florida Goodwills were able to leverage their capacity to collect and move goods efficiently through their systems to relieve the Red Cross of these logistical processes.

On the other side of the equation, the Red Cross deployed its ability to assess and identify need in order to efficiently distribute disaster recovery certificates, which Goodwill issued to those most in need. This partnership was quite successful and marks a commitment to coming together to address challenges. I'm very proud of this work.

**Boyden:** How do Goodwill's relationships with big brands, elected officials and other leaders play a role in the organization's mission?

**Gibbons:** Goodwills are first and foremost community-based organizations, and when serving a community, relationships with outside stakeholders are essential. We place a great deal of emphasis on connecting with leaders from a variety of spheres, including the local community, government and business.

These connections enable us to achieve our mission of helping our Goodwill program participants acquire the skills to launch and advance in their careers.

Engagements with big companies and brands are also mutually beneficial relationships. With employees and consumers placing increased importance on corporate social responsibility initiatives, many companies have forged a renewed commitment to engaging in and measuring the success of these activities.

So in working with companies and brands, we are able to honor our mission, while companies can reach their corporate social responsibility goals and objectives in a substantive and impactful way.

**Boyden:** For the second year in a row, consumers ranked Goodwill as the #1 brand doing the most good on enso's World Value Index. To what do you credit this recognition?

**Gibbons:** It is ultimately the people of Goodwill who have allowed our brand to become a 360-degree touchpoint, by representing the organization in an exemplary manner. These 128,000 team members across the country embody Goodwill with their persistence, performance and passion for the business, illuminating the work of Goodwill across a broad audience of consumers.

**Boyden:** How does Goodwill build and differentiate its organizational culture?

**Gibbons:** At Goodwill Industries International, we have a team of professionals who are in place to support this complex network of 162 Goodwills by building the business, strengthening the brand, and advancing the mission. As part of this work, we recognize the significance of our culture and subscribe to Peter Drucker's phrase that "culture eats strategy for breakfast."

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For this reason, we have a culture statement that speaks to our values and brand, our passion for the Goodwill mission, our celebration and commitment to diversity and inclusion, and our accountability to ethical standards.

To foster ownership of this culture at all levels, this statement was developed by the entire organization and is ingrained in everything we do. Twice a year we come together for our Culture Week event, comprised of team meetings, feedback and planning, which allows us to recommit ourselves to the culture we have all worked to create.

#### Boyden: How does Goodwill approach the process of attracting and retaining talent?

**Gibbons:** We work to attract top talent with problem-solving skills for both the social enterprise model and the delivery of human services. Goodwill's social enterprise model has allowed us to remain cognizant of how we serve people, stay in touch with peoples' needs, and hold ourselves accountable to customer satisfaction.

This, in turn, translates to how we attract and retain talent. We're committed to paying competitive wages and fostering a culture of opportunity and respect, which helps us attract and retain a high-impact team.

#### Boyden: What specific skills do you think are particularly important for an employee to be successful at Goodwill Industries International?

**Gibbons:** There is a certain level of brain power and energy that I consider necessary as a price of entry. However, the elements that serve to differentiate a candidate revolve around optimism and being other-centered. Someone who is smart, has good energy, is optimistic and thinks of others has the ingredients for success on their team.

#### Boyden: How is training embedded in Goodwill's model?

**Gibbons:** Goodwill is marked by a deep commitment not only to the program participants who receive services, but also to our team members who can similarly benefit from these services. We therefore emphasize skill development, financial awareness and financial strengthening. Individuals must understand not only how to earn a living wage, but how to save it and create an environment for long-term success.

Investing in our team members is a critical component of our work. We invest heavily in our teams and their development with comprehensive leadership development programs for Goodwill up-and-comers as well as managers and executives, to enable continued organizational growth. Goodwill fosters a culture focused on individual and organizational commitments to learning.

#### Boyden: What is Goodwill's approach to innovation and building upon its legacy as an innovative leader in the not-for-profit sector?

**Gibbons:** The power of Goodwill is at the local level, where each of our 162 Goodwills serves as a 'test kitchen' for innovation, drawing upon the initiatives of local leaders and social entrepreneurs. For example, 15 years ago, a leader in Orange County's Goodwill (California) launched the website *shopgoodwill.com*, which became the first not-for-profit auction site and remains a driving force for Goodwill's e-commerce strategy.

Out of Durham, GCFLearnFree initially emerged as a learning platform designed to leverage the internet to reach rural North Carolina, and is now reaching 30 million people around the world. It is Goodwill's 128,000 team members across the country who develop our innovative ideas and solutions.

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We don't limit innovation to the next iPhone or the newest app; rather, we understand innovation to be that next idea that allows us to serve one more person that much more effectively. To reach this goal, we attempt to leverage our wider network for large-scale programmatic implementation.

One example of working with others to fuel innovation is our recent launch of the Goodwill Digital Career Accelerator. With a \$10 million grant from Google and the assistance of 1,000 Google volunteers, we will provide more than one million people with digital skills and learning opportunities over the next three years. This initiative combines Google's skill with Goodwill's presence to advance digital skills. Programs such as these allow us to build on our legacy of innovation to advance our mission while leveraging our presence and brand in a powerful and impactful way.

**Boyden: Considering the changing retail landscape, how does Goodwill keep pace and adapt to the expectations of today's customers?**

**Gibbons:** Every individual Goodwill organization molds itself according to its community's needs, both in terms of mission delivery and retail model. As customer expectations continue to change and customers demand an increasingly seamless, integrated physical and virtual shopping experience, Goodwills across the country are pivoting and adapting.

Goodwill Industries International is partnering with Goodwills across the country to create a seamless shopping experience, leveraging both the e-commerce and physical presence. So in this landscape we are coming together as a network to collaborate and ultimately deliver meaningful results for our customers.

**Boyden: Looking back on your tenure at Goodwill, what is one decision that you are particularly proud of?**

**Gibbons:** Over the last few years, we began to identify an increasing need for capital amidst a growing interest in social impact investment. To connect these trends, we decided to form a single-purpose corporation called Goodwill Mission Job Creation Services, which was launched as a job creation fund and raised \$10 million in program-related investment from the Ford Foundation, Casey Foundation, and the Kresge Foundation.

This decision ultimately created an impact investing institution that has resulted in more rapid expansion and increased capabilities across the Goodwill network. We have also developed methods for tracking the connection between financial investment and social impact, which is always a desired metric in the not-for-profit space. The development of this fund required a great deal of work and has greatly benefitted the Goodwill mission. In our fourth year, we are looking forward to expanding it.

**Boyden: How do you define success for yourself at Goodwill?**

**Gibbons:** We have a high degree of expectation of both leadership and service, and a high degree of pressure to deliver impact. I am honored to be part of the Goodwill brand and organization, so my number-one priority is to continually meet these expectations and reinvent processes and methods to ensure we have the greatest impact.

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*The views and opinions expressed here do not necessarily represent the views of Boyden; only those of Mr. Gibbons. For more on the topic of leadership in social impact, see the latest edition of The Boyden View.*