

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You're listening to *Work in Progress*. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor in chief of WorkingNation. *Work in Progress* explores the rapidly changing workplace through conversations with innovators, educators, and decision-makers, people with solutions to today's workforce challenges.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

My guest today is Maria Flynn, CEO of JFF, a nonprofit focused on developing innovative programs and public policies that create a more highly skilled and competitive workforce, a workforce that is accessible to all. Maria, thank you so much for joining me on *Work in Progress*.

Maria Flynn, JFF president & CEO:

Hi, Ramona. It's great to be here. Thank you for the invitation.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Always good to hear from you. Always good to talk to you. I want to talk a little bit about where we're at with COVID right now and COVID-19. It's become really clear that the wound to our workforce inflicted by this pandemic is deep. It's going to take time and a joint national effort to really repair it. With millions out of work, and we've seen not only people struggling to figure out how to get back into the workforce, we've seen some really deep societal issues, and JFF recently put out a white paper, a memo, to the incoming administration to discuss some of this and some recommendations. Why don't you tell us the big picture, where you think we're at, and where we need to go? And I know this is a very big subject, so we'll dive into it as we go.

Maria Flynn, JFF president & CEO:

Awesome. I think it's a huge question. And I think one that really was a huge theme throughout the election season that we just had, right? And I think that is so central to what folks are feeling across the country at this moment as they look towards the future and as they look at the future and the prosperity of their family and their loved ones. At JFF, we have been looking at the issues of jobs and education and how to prepare for the future of work since we were initially founded back in 1983. And before COVID, I think very much like WorkingNation, we were focused on the future of work trends, working to help traditional systems, whether they be community colleges or workforce boards or community-based organizations or other entities, really prepare for that future.

Maria Flynn, JFF president & CEO:

And I think what we saw with COVID hitting in March was that a lot of those future trends suddenly became the reality of the day. And I think looking from the fact of so many services needing to move to a virtual versus in-person services to the elimination of many jobs and just the disruption that COVID brought to industries and occupations and regional economies across the country. And a lot of the inequities that we saw in our labor market and our overall economy pre-COVID have worsened since then. And that combined with the focus on racial justice and racial equity that we have seen in the wake of the murder of George Floyd has just brought a lot of these issues even closer to the surface and has shown an even brighter lights and urgency upon them.

Maria Flynn, JFF president & CEO:

And so earlier, actually last month in November, after the election, we did issue a memo to the Biden administration that laid out our recommendations for how the federal government across the executive branch and the legislative branch can really move to build an equitable economic recovery. How do we not just build back to the way we were before, but how do we build to a more equitable future for all? And that's very aligned with the overall mission of JFF, which is to drive economic advancement for everyone by really driving the transformation of the education and workforce systems in the country. In our note ... Oh, sorry, go ahead.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

No, no, I wanted to ask the question, you just mentioned that this would be changes in policies across different parts of the government, not just the executive but there's a legislative, what kind of recommendations are you making for the new administration?

Maria Flynn, JFF president & CEO:

Yep. Our recommendations fall in three buckets. The first is recommendations that would help all people rebound and advance in the economy. The second being a bucket of revitalizing regional economies. And then the third is focused on redesigning education and workforce development systems. And within each of those we outline executive actions, so actions that the new administration can take on their own without congressional action; a bucket of stimulus opportunities, so what provisions could be included in a future economic stimulus package that would require congressional action; and then a category of reforms to existing laws, such as we WIOA, Carl Perkins, other education and workforce statutes that are currently in place.

Maria Flynn, JFF president & CEO:

But, to give you a sense of some of those, like in the first category of helping all people rebound and advance, we talk about as an executive action for the Biden administration to issue an inter-agency directive that would identify conflicting social program requirements and remove barriers to self-sufficiency. And so something like this could build upon the cross agency career pathways guidance that the Obama administration issued about six years ago and could really start to take that a step further and really work to align the incentives and the requirements across the various education workforce social service programs.

Maria Flynn, JFF president & CEO:

Because, right now, when those programs hit communities, many of those requirements are in tension with one another. The incentives for one program may be the opposite of the incentives in another. And so I think that's an example of where federal leadership across the agencies can really make a huge difference. An example of something that we have in the stimulus opportunities in that category would be the establishment of a digital transformation fund to modernize American job centers, so the one-stop career centers that are managed by the local workforce boards across the country because many of those boards and those centers have struggled to keep pace in this rapid shift to virtual service delivery and need additional resources and support to really implement the type of digital transformation that we need to see even in a post-COVID environment.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

One of the things that I was thinking of after you mentioned how everything has accelerated is there was already a struggle for workers sometimes to find the training that was necessary for the jobs that

they needed in their communities. How can we, as people interested in this space and the government, how can we all work together to make sure those opportunities are out there and seen by job seekers? It drives me crazy that they can't find these programs in their own communities.

Maria Flynn, JFF president & CEO:

Absolutely. I often cite career navigation as one of the largest challenges that we face as a nation because I think it is a weakness that is felt across the board between students and parents, between workers and even employers how to make this system of opportunities more transparent and actionable to folks. And I think, like most things, the students and the workers who are struggling to make ends meet and may not have the social capital and the connections that more entitled folks may have are feeling this disconnect even more, so really struggling to find the information that they need to make good choices about what comes next for them.

Maria Flynn, JFF president & CEO:

And so we do touch on this issue in our recommendations to the Biden administration in terms of the importance of the federal government really leaning into the career navigation issue, but we have also touched on it through our team at JFF Labs. They recently issued a career navigation market scan, which examined the various companies, particularly technology-based companies, that are working to solve the gap that exists in the ecosystem. And as part of that, we identified 18 innovators to watch, so 18 companies that we feel are really approaching this issue of career navigation in some interesting ways.

Maria Flynn, JFF president & CEO:

But, we have a number of elements that we feel are critical when it comes to career navigation, so for example, one that the mechanism really be student and worker centers: how are you providing information in a way that really works for the individual, making sure that the information is flowing in a user-friendly and interactive way, making sure that it is aligned with employer needs, that it is equity driven, making sure that these systems and programs are not perpetuating historic biases, that they are actually driven with equity at the forefront, that they're being delivered in innovative ways. Depending on whether someone has strong digital literacy skills or not, making sure that this information is accessible across the board.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Is there anyone that's doing it right? I know you're giving 18 examples, but is there some group, some organization, some program that is making itself so available to job seekers that they should be going there right now?

Maria Flynn, JFF president & CEO:

Sure. I'll flag a few. One is Career Karma, which is led by Ruben Harris, who is just a phenomenal entrepreneur. And Career Karma is a platform that matches workers with training programs and also provides a community of peers for an individual to engage with. That's one I would definitely call out. Ruben spoke at our Horizons Conference this past June. Another is Blendoor, which is a people analytics platform that's used to improve hiring and mitigate unconscious bias. And that is run by Stephanie Lampkin, who we've also engaged with at JFF over the years. Another one is Jobcase, which is led by Fred Goff. And that's a social media platform that provides access to jobs, career networking, tips, and advice to frontline workers. And then there's also one that JFF actually developed called MyBestBets.

And that's a mobile app that guides low income, young people to high value education and training programs.

Maria Flynn, JFF president & CEO:

And all of the Job Corps centers nationwide are currently implementing MyBestBets for their Job Corps students. And they use the name, MyPace, but it's based off of the JFF platform. Those are just a few of the innovators to watch that we flag. And I think there's a lot of great innovation out there. I think what I am eager to see is how can we help some of these innovations really get to scale and how can the federal government help support some of this movement and ecosystem building when it comes to career navigation.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

An important part, I believe, of workforce development and preparing workers with the skills they need is having the employer signal what kind of skills they're looking for and then take part in the process of making sure that people have those. Are there any companies out there that are doing that well that you've worked with and, if not, how do we get them on board?

Maria Flynn, JFF president & CEO:

Yeah, so I think we are starting to see some encouraging signs of companies really moving towards more skills-based hiring and prioritizing skills and competencies over traditional degrees. I would say that the work that Workday is doing, particularly in partnership with opportunity at work and their talent marketplace, is an effort to watch for sure.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

It's important that corporations are part of the solutions and making sure that they are letting job seekers and workforce development programs know what kind of skills they need, what role should they be playing in this?

Maria Flynn, JFF president & CEO:

Yeah, so I think companies have a critical role to play and can really start to make a huge difference in the market by continuing a shift towards skills-based hiring versus focus on traditional degrees. And so I think that both is changing how job descriptions are worded. At JFF, several years ago, we started taking degree requirements out of our job postings. And so that's a critical first step. The next is how are you actually engaging in your hiring process to prioritize a focus on skills and how do you assess those skills? And so there are great, I think, technology products out there that are starting to build the framework that's needed to do that.

Maria Flynn, JFF president & CEO:

And I think that we're going to see over the next couple of weeks efforts by the business round table, particularly their multiple pathways initiative that is part of their overarching racial equity initiative that is going to continue to encourage and support corporate action in this direction, which is really exciting. I think this is one of the areas where, in the past three to five years, just have really started to see companies stepping up in some new and exciting ways. At JFF, we manage something called the Corporate Action Platform, which is a place where corporations can come together and learn from one another. And we guide that process using our impact employer framework, which is a set of practices

that we encourage employers to implement that really put the employee at the center of their policies and practices and really focus on the importance of helping workers advance in the company and in the labor market in general.

Maria Flynn, JFF president & CEO:

And so since COVID, we have seen a number of companies come on board with our Recover Stronger campaign. And so later in December, we're going to be announcing a new set of companies that have signed on to our Recover Stronger initiative. Some of the initial companies that are part of this effort include Walmart and Autodesk, Microsoft, Workday, and many others to come. And similar building off of the impact and flare idea, the Recover Stronger companies are committing to put workers at the center of their recovery efforts and movements towards skills-based hiring is a great example of the type of practices that can entail.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

One of the recommendations you're making in your memo to the new Biden administration is redesigning education and workforce development systems. Education does play a big role in this, whether it's community college or any other higher education or short term certification programs, what kind of redesign are you hoping to see?

Maria Flynn, JFF president & CEO:

We are really hoping to see a redesign that makes higher education, post-secondary education opportunities, more agile, more accessible, and more connected to the labor market. And again, I think, like many things, we see some amazing pockets of innovation. I know you've had Scott Pulsipher, the president of Western Governors University, on this podcast. And WGU is a great example of an institution that is really driving important changes around competency-based education and other innovative approaches to higher ed.

Maria Flynn, JFF president & CEO:

I think we're also seeing a lot of startups and smaller organizations launch some interesting approaches as well. Some examples would be Climb Hire that Nitzan Pelman is running, or Merit America that is currently operating in a few cities, or SV Academy that is led by Rahim Fazal. And those are very interesting, very intentionally designed short-term training programs that are truly designed with equity at the forefront and are intentionally designed with strong labor market outcomes as a goal. And I think what we want to see as JFF and where I think there's a ton of potential is how do we bridge these worlds between the large legacy systems and institutions in higher ed and some of these newer, more innovative, more agile models. And how can we be pairing them together or taking the best of both worlds to create new approaches that are going to have enhanced outcomes across the board?

Maria Flynn, JFF president & CEO:

A key piece up or diving into is around financing. How do these programs get paid for? I think particularly when a lot of these shorter term programs are not eligible for Pell Grants and the WIOA training dollars can be quite hard to come by in a lot of areas, and so we have launched a Financing the Future initiative that is looking at what are some of the innovative financing models that can be deployed and tested across these programs. And so that could be something like an income share agreement model or other approaches that are currently out there, so one example of where innovation and transformation are going to be key.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And finally, if you had a message for the job seeker themselves, the person who's either trying to get back into the workplace or is just getting out of school and trying to figure out, or just whatever training program they're taking, trying to figure out how to move forward in their career, what advice would you give them?

Maria Flynn, JFF president & CEO:

My advice would be to look beyond their comfort level. Look beyond their comfort zone and examine new opportunities, new pathways, new occupations that might seem different or challenging, but to really be bold in their decision-making and their choices and to not be afraid to ask questions because I think, as we said, a lot of the peer navigation can be quite daunting. And so I think it's important for job seekers to advocate for themselves and to ask questions, whether that's through an American job center, whether that's through a community-based organization, but to advocate for themselves and to think big as they continue their journey.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Maria, good advice. And thank you as always for engaging in conversation with us here at WorkingNation. We love talking to you.

Maria Flynn, JFF president & CEO:

Thanks so much, Ramona. Thanks for having me.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

We've been speaking to Maria Flynn, CEO of JFF. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor in chief of WorkingNation. Thank you very much for listening.