

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You're listening to Work in Progress. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, Editor-in-Chief of Working Nation. 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:

Joining me today is Matt Dunne, founder and executive director of the nonprofit Center On Rural Innovation. Matt, thank you very much for joining me today.

Matt Dunne, Center on Rural Innovation exec dir:

Great to be with you.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I don't know how many folks out there know the nonprofits, so why don't you give us an overview on what your mission is?

Matt Dunne, Center on Rural Innovation exec dir:

Sure. So the Center In Rural Innovation is an action tank that is dedicated to closing the urban, rural economic divide, and we focus on building digital economy ecosystems to make sure that there is a more equitable economy, particularly in the face of automation.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

A very important topic is the broadband as part of this, I think. So why don't we start with that? Tell me what your organization has been doing, how you've been working to make sure that there's an equitable access to broadband?

Matt Dunne, Center on Rural Innovation exec dir:

Even before the pandemic, we knew that if you were going to create digital economy jobs in rural places, which are the jobs that grow out of automation and the other real trends of our time, that you had to be on a level playing field in those economic models.

Matt Dunne, Center on Rural Innovation exec dir:

And the very basic level is, you need to have access to broadband. You need to be able to collaborate with people, not only in your immediate community, but all over the world. You need to have access to data and data analytics, and you need to have access to what is now the largest, super computer ever created, which is the cloud computing infrastructure that can allow for technology products and services to really thrive, but only if you have that connection to them. So we have been doing work in communities, in partnership with a company called CTC Technologies, to help those rural communities do the pre-development work, understand what are the business models, what are the organizational structures and the funding resources that can allow them to build fiber to the home that will provide, essentially, future-proof connectivity speeds and ones that are frankly, faster than you can usually get in big cities like New York and San Francisco.

Matt Dunne, Center on Rural Innovation exec dir:

The interesting part of this process is that many people think that it's impossible to bring world-class broadband to rural places, and it's just not true. In fact, rural communities, pretty much one at a time, have gone through a scrappy, individualized process of bringing fiber to the home in communities that census tracts represent over 10 million rural people. So this can be done. They're usually done in hybrid, public-private partnerships of some kind, and in many cases, they're leveraging the kinds of organizations that brought electricity to those regions of the country, when the marketplace wouldn't do that on their own. Cooperative electric companies, municipal electric companies, small telephone companies with special status from the FCC. And those have been the laboratories of innovation of bringing broadband, and now other communities are developing things like telecommunication union districts that can bridge over municipal boundaries and county boundaries to create a quasi-public enterprises that can still leverage low-cost capital through municipal bonds, while delivering a broadband product to their constituents that can really work and be financially sustainable.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

It's really interesting, how this is being done piecemeal, but I think COVID has really pointed out, it sometimes takes a nationwide event to really draw focus on how important something like this infrastructure is, when it comes to work, and when it comes to schools, and to [inaudible 00:04:44].

Matt Dunne, Center on Rural Innovation exec dir:

The pandemic really laid bare what many of us already knew, which was the lack of universal broadband and a lack of equity. That was true in creating what was known at the FCC as the homework gap, because even if you were doing most of your school day in a school that had plenty of access, if there was a differential in your ability to access content after school, it wasn't that different from when the kids who had electricity in their home were able to read books at night and others who weren't. And now that everything is online and many schools are going partially or fully remote, the inequity becomes even more pronounced, especially if you can't go to a library for that type of access, because the libraries are closed to patrons. And it's a little depressing to see, in many rural places, folks sitting in their cars outside of a library building, or a school building, trying to get the wifi that's coming out of the windows.

Matt Dunne, Center on Rural Innovation exec dir:

That's not what the most affluent nation in the world should be seeing. The other is on the nature of health. Telehealth had been plodding along. It has really taken off in the pandemic and is really important because if we can allow for our most vulnerable to get a number of their health services and check-ins online, that means they're not going to the place where there's usually the highest concentration of infected people, which is our hospitals and clinics. And unfortunately that is only available to those who have enough broadband to do video conferencing and allow for the sharing of images and other kinds of things that facilitate telehealth. So it's critical on a variety of fronts and in this situation, it's the difference between life and death.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

In addition to the health issues and the education, we're hearing more and more from business leaders that as they start trying to figure out how to bring people back to work, there is more emphasis, and there has been for some time, on digital skills. I understand you're working with Udacity, you've been working with you Udacity, to help make sure that rural all Americans get these skills. Tell us about that program.

Matt Dunne, Center on Rural Innovation exec dir:

Sure. We look at it in a couple different fronts. One is making sure that rural all people know how to do remote work well, and that's a specific skill unto itself, not only how to use tools like Slack and Zoom and other kinds of mechanisms, but also how to be a good collaborator, how to be a good manager, how to create central sources of truth that allow for people to collaborate around projects without all having to be in the same physical place. And then beyond that, we are working with Udacity on a program to help individuals in rural places have the skills to participate in the digital economy. And so these include data analytics, front-end web development, and IT services. These are high-demand jobs in the technology fields that can be done remotely, but also have demand in rural places, even before we start to do the other part of our work, which is support and encourage scalable tech companies in these locations.

Matt Dunne, Center on Rural Innovation exec dir:

So Udacity was gracious enough to provide 300 Nanodegree scholarships, which has a very high value. We did outreach through our 18 network communities to be able to encourage folks to take advantage of those scholarships, and we got a wonderful response in this first round and have well over a hundred people who are pursuing one of those nanodegree programs, and we're going to see the results of those in the winter and spring, depending on the program, and then be looking to place those individuals into jobs that might be local. Banks and hospitals frequently go in to hire tech talent out of Brooklyn, even though there is that capacity right in their rural community. So we're going to try and do that matchmaking as well as engage with the companies that have made the decision that remote works, and you've got companies like Mozilla that have decided to make distributed work a permanent thing. And so we're wanting to prepare a cohort of rural folks to take advantage of that opportunity and hopefully be able to scale that up significantly over the months and years to come.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

A lot of the check jobs are located in so-called Silicon Valley areas on either coast, really, I guess, the Silicon Valley of California, but also Boston area and a few others along the coast. What is being done to bring some of those jobs more to rural America, to different communities where somebody might want to live and not have to move to one of the coastal towns?

Matt Dunne, Center on Rural Innovation exec dir:

The real difference in the recovery from 2008 recession that led to the urban, rural economic divide, the likes of which we have not seen in a century, came about because automation and globalization created a lot of jobs in the US and it removed a lot of jobs. And the problem was, the jobs that were created were predominantly in urban areas, and the jobs that were removed were predominantly in rural, and a huge chunk of those were digital economy jobs in the technology fields. So we believe there is a moment to seize where companies, out of necessity, have opened their aperture to hiring people that are not all in the same 25 zip codes. And frankly, that approach of having to have everyone completely proximate is what led to the housing affordability crisis in these major tech hubs.

Matt Dunne, Center on Rural Innovation exec dir:

We think that there is a chance to make this work and to make it a permanent part of the way that companies function moving forward, and also allow for tech startups and investors to believe that tech startups can happen in rural places. And this comes from a certain amount of experience. I worked for Google for eight and a half years, and when they were first talking to me about coming on board, they want to know how soon I could move to Mountain View, California. And I said, "Never." And they were

very confused and it took them a while to actually get around to formally making an offer. But eventually they let me give it a shot of working out of a small office in White River Junction, Vermont, and five years into working at Google, I had colleagues who didn't realize that I wasn't in Mountain View because they don't meet in person.

Matt Dunne, Center on Rural Innovation exec dir:

They'd video conference across the street. I would show up for the really important meetings and be very present, it's not that hard to do, and they were really surprised when it turned out that I was doing most of that work out of the beautiful upper valley of Vermont, in New Hampshire. So it's totally doable. You just need to do some mind shifts. You need to make sure that both people who are working and managers think about how they engage people in a different way. And if we do that, we really do have the potential for a more equitable economy in our country. And if we don't do it, I am very worried that we will see the divisions economically and in other ways, continue to grow.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You've put together a rural innovation network. Is that part of their task, to help create that awareness and help with the resources?

Matt Dunne, Center on Rural Innovation exec dir:

Well, I mean, the rural innovation network is a network of communities, all of whom had come to the conclusion that they needed to build digital economy ecosystems as part of their economic future. And they reached out to us when we were offering to do technical assistance, to do strategic planning and support services, to both build the strategy for building a digital economy ecosystem with an emphasis on early stage tech startups. And frankly, many of them had already solved a bunch of the problems that we didn't even know the solutions to, and so we've worked with them. They have then become part of a community of practice, sharing their best ideas for how to do this kind of work, and are also the mechanism for us partnering with a company like Udacity, because Udacity knows that we're not just going to be engaging one community or one state, but actually a wide range of different communities, all of them are committed to this cause.

Matt Dunne, Center on Rural Innovation exec dir:

This is critical for the work that we're doing, because if you tried to get an investor or a company interested in one small community, it's not going to succeed, because there isn't enough deal flow or talent flow. But if you create a consortium, you get network value. And so when we stood up a seed fund to invest in early stage tech companies, we weren't just trying to focus on one rural region of the country. We were able to look across all of these different markets, and we saw over 200 companies that were investment ready, and we made five really great, thoughtful deployments because we were able to look at this larger virtual community that actually has the total population of St. Louis and Seattle combined.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

On a personal level, what is it that drives you to do this work? You're a lifelong Vermonter, I believe.

Matt Dunne, Center on Rural Innovation exec dir:

It's true.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Did you grow up in this type of community? What is your driving force behind what you're doing, your nonprofit?

Matt Dunne, Center on Rural Innovation exec dir:

Yeah. So I did grow up in heartland. In fact, my wife and I are raising our family in the farmhouse where I grew up, and I watched it go from being a predominantly dairy and machine tool town to something else, and that was a really hard transition through the eighties and nineties. And you saw the potential of that challenge becoming much more intense, but that same community gave me the chance to go to the college of my dreams. They also elected me at a very young age, the state legislature, straight out of college, to represent them outside of the legislature, which is part-time. I was a marketing director for a software company based in Wilder, Vermont, that we grew to a hundred employees and had a great exit. And then I had the chance to work on a national platform as the head of AmeriCorps Vista under the Clinton administration, and really got to see rural economic challenges on a national scale.

Matt Dunne, Center on Rural Innovation exec dir:

And then finally at Google, being able to have the perspective of a large technology company, but also seeing where that created divisions in economic opportunity really motivated standing up this organization, because it didn't take a lot of data and research to understand that there was an unprecedented chasm growing that threatened to divide our country in fundamental ways. I think we've seen evidence of it in a lot of things, including the way people vote, the way people approach economic and cultural challenges, but more importantly, you just have a division of opportunity, and that's never a good thing, particularly in a country as large as ours with incredible potential in every corner, and you just need to make sure that you're allowing for that potential to be unlocked.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Do you think there's been progress made, not just by your organization, but in general, by other people who feel the same way you do?

Matt Dunne, Center on Rural Innovation exec dir:

There's been some. I think there are some great organizations that have been at this work for a long time, like Rural LISC and [Arcap 00:18:27], and then there are some newer ones like RuralRISE and others that have gotten into this space around the same time that we have, but there's still a lot of work to do. There's so much that we've had to do that I really didn't count on, to shift the narrative about what rural is and what its potential is. I mean, we had people at very, very senior levels literally suggesting that maybe our job should be to allow these smaller communities to die peacefully, and I wasn't sure what to do with that. I mean, I had someone I know for a long time who, when we announced the organization, suggested that we change it because rural is such a derogatory term.

Matt Dunne, Center on Rural Innovation exec dir:

There's a lot of bias that has grown up over the last 10 or 20 years about who is rural America. And by the way, rural America is not white America. It's actually incredibly diverse in many regions of our country. Anyway, we've been having to do a lot of work on that narrative shift to making sure people understand the inspiring ecosystem builders and communities that we're working with every day. And then on the other hand, also working with rural communities who've been told for so long that they

can't have a vibrant entrepreneurial ecosystem, or somehow they're not able to do technology because they don't live in a big city, that they really can, and to allow them the hope and the possibility of doing that kind of work, largely by sharing what it is that other communities like them have done.

Matt Dunne, Center on Rural Innovation exec dir:

And that's why we've launched a short film series that we've produced. One about Cape Girardeau, Missouri was released three or four weeks ago, which is up on our website, ruralinnovation.us, which really captures a community that no one, I think, would have thought as being a place where technology, youth coding leagues, and scalable tech startups could happen, and it is, and it is in an authentic and really inspiring way.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So that website again is ruralinnovation.us. Matt Dunne, you're the founder and executive directors, and I really appreciate you talking with us today on Work in Progress.

Matt Dunne, Center on Rural Innovation exec dir:

Thank you so much for focusing on this subject.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

This is Work in Progress. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, Editor-in-Chief of Working Nation. Thank you for listening.