

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. Joining me today is Jamie Merisotis, President and CEO of Lumina Foundation. And we get a chance today to talk about his new book, Human Work in the Age of Smart Machines. Jamie, thank you so much for joining the podcast.

Jamie Merisotis, Lumina Foundation president & CEO:

Delighted to be with you.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You and I have talked in the past about workforce development and the role education plays in it. And I think now things have changed a lot because of COVID-19. What are you seeing, what are you thinking about out there when you intersect those two things?

Jamie Merisotis, Lumina Foundation president & CEO:

I think one of the things that's obvious is that we've seen millions of people having lost their job, unemployment rate has been very high, but I think equally important, one of the things that we've seen in this environment is that the people with higher levels of education are comparatively better off. By that, I mean that those individuals are more likely to work in work contexts that make them safer, that permit them to do work that is remote. The Bureau of Labor statistics says that about 25% of Americans are teleworking right now. But for people with bachelor's degrees or higher, it's almost 50% compared to less than 10% of people with a high school degree or less. And so we know that COVID has had these disproportionate impacts on people of color. The infection rates, for example, for African-Americans are twice the rate of Whites.

Jamie Merisotis, Lumina Foundation president & CEO:

But we also know that for people who are in working in jobs that require lower levels of education, they tend to require more interaction. They can't tele-work. And so it's a good example of where your ability to have post-high school learning and a credential that matters, not only helps you economically, it helps you socially. It helps your health, in this case, what we're seeing in the pandemic. It helps you personally, and it contributes to our collective well-being. And I think the crisis of COVID has simply accelerated the trends that we've seen coming over the last few years.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So this is trends that are shifting more toward technical technology skills, knowledge based, so everybody needs that access, that opportunity to get those skills.

Jamie Merisotis, Lumina Foundation president & CEO:

Yeah, one of the things that I think is important is that I've tried to describe this shift in simple terms, which is basically that what we're seeing is a shift towards human work, which is the work that only humans can do. And by that, I mean that, as artificial intelligence and AI have taken on more and more of the tasks that people can do, we have to prepare people for the work that only humans can do. And so there's been a lot of discussion, Ramona, about whether or not the robots are coming to take our jobs. And I don't think that's the question. I think what we have to figure out here is, what tasks we do

that are uniquely human and how we can actually prepare for those tasks in work and in life. And one of the things that I think is really important for us as human workers as opposed to the machines that are doing the work is that for us as humans, work matters.

Jamie Merisotis, Lumina Foundation president & CEO:

We work not only because it helps us economically, but because it gives us meaning and purpose and social mobility and personal satisfaction. And so one of the things that I think is important for us to think about here is how we are actually going to develop those human work traits and capabilities over the course of an entire lifetime. How do we enhance and develop our human capacities, our compassion, our ethics, our critical thinking, our interpersonal communication through formal learning experiences, through work, and in our daily lives? And it's one of the reasons why as President of Lumina Foundation I think a lot about how we can improve both formal and informal learning after high school, because I think we have to intentionally develop those human traits, expanding opportunities for people who have been underserved, particularly people of color, but doing so in a way that impacts our collective well-being as a society.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I think innately we do have that feeling that work is important to us. People ask the question, "What do you do for a living?" And when you have an answer that you're proud of or a job career that you're proud of, it's easier to talk about. And we should all be proud. I'm not saying there's jobs out there that we shouldn't be proud of, but there's a certain sense of accomplishment that we have by saying, "This is what we do." But is there an understanding in people, a human understanding, that we have to rethink how we learn what we need to know before we can get those jobs that we want?

Jamie Merisotis, Lumina Foundation president & CEO:

Yeah, I think so. I think there is a concept that emerging here, I call it in the book, wide learning, which a little different than the way I think we've talked about learning in the past. So I try to contrast wide learning with what people say about machines, which is that they do deep learning. So machines can learn by essentially using algorithms and they dig deeper and deeper into data sets and that's how they gain the ability to perform tasks faster to recognize patterns, to do things repetitively, et cetera. But humans learn through this concept that I call wide learning and it includes time, people, and content. And we've talked a lot in the last few years in the education space about so-called lifelong learning, which is that it takes place in a wide time context, over the course of people's entire lifetimes.

Jamie Merisotis, Lumina Foundation president & CEO:

That's really important to human work. I don't like the phrase lifelong learning, by the way, because from the consumer perspective, it sounds like a sentence, not something that you would want to participate in. But I think, from an objective perspective, it's this virtuous cycle that you have to repeat many times over your working life cycle, not simply once, this idea that you learn early in life and you work later in life, I think has broken down. And wide learning also includes this idea that the people who are doing the learning must represent that wide notion it has to serve a wide range of people who are diverse in terms of their race, their gender, their immigration status, et cetera, they have to reflect the totality of society for all of us to really share in the benefits that we get from our human work.

Jamie Merisotis, Lumina Foundation president & CEO:

And, obviously, the third dimension of wide learning is the content. They have to learn to be successful in the human work ecosystem in ways that represent that wide array of human traits and capabilities. And so that's one of the things that I think is fundamentally different about where we are right now, which is that we've talked a lot about content. So we're very focused right now on STEM, for example, science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. Those are really important concepts from a content perspective, but we also need to continue to develop the generalizable human traits and capabilities, those things that make us uniquely human. And that includes that desire for meaning and serving others.

Jamie Merisotis, Lumina Foundation president & CEO:

I think it's a very important part of who we are as humans and why we need to prepare people in the learning system for those human traits and capabilities just as much as we're preparing them for the content, the specific information they might need in chemistry or graphic design or whatever the field is, they might be in. They also have to learn ways of enhancing their human traits and capabilities. That will be increasingly important as the machines do more and more of the work that we've done.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You talk about this as an emerging concept. Is there any organization, any program that you think has embraced this to the right degree right now?

Jamie Merisotis, Lumina Foundation president & CEO:

I think the idea of this has really come to the fore in different organizations that are looking at how you transform the way in which individuals are being dislocated from one career area to maybe another career area and they're being forced to rethink how they actually prepare people for these new work experiences. So there's been a lot of conversation, for example, about truck drivers, and truck drivers are increasingly going to face headwinds because of self-driving vehicles. Well, step one, which we saw quite a few of these stories in recent years was, "Oh, well, let's get truck drivers to code." The problem with that is that truck drivers don't want to code. It's too far of a bridge for them to go from driving a big rig to learning how to code.

Jamie Merisotis, Lumina Foundation president & CEO:

However, truck drivers can develop new careers, new skills in fields that are adjacent to what they know. So we should be thinking about getting truck drivers, for example, into things like logistics. Logistics is actually a big and growing industry. It requires an understanding of how goods and services move. And I think that's a good example of an area where we could see more capacity to build those human traits and capabilities of workers. Another example, by the way, one that's come up fairly recently is our step back on the efforts of the last few years to rethink the coal industry. At the end of the day, coal did not come back. We have fewer coal jobs today nationally than we did four years ago. But we have seen organizations that are trying to help the coal workers actually develop their human traits and capabilities.

Jamie Merisotis, Lumina Foundation president & CEO:

So there's an organization called Coalfield Development Corporation in West Virginia, and they've been working for several years on getting coal industry workers training in jobs and industries that are adjacent like agriculture and carpentry and other fields where their human traits and capabilities are going to be useful for them for many years to come. At the same time, Coalfield is actually giving these

individuals in their program life skills classes and requiring them to go to community college. So it's a bridge. The point is that these companies and organizations that are doing that are seeing a bridge from where they are now to where they need to be, and I think that's the right path forward.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

It seems that from what you're saying employers have to have a stake in this. Employers and industries have to embrace this concept that our business is changing and they know that, and they're changing it, but we have to prepare employers, we have to create this pipeline. Otherwise, people will be out of work and we won't have the employees that we need.

Jamie Merisotis, Lumina Foundation president & CEO:

That's absolutely right, and here I think the employers also will need to understand that the future really is about human work. And one of the things that I think employers have to do a better job of is embracing the diversity of their employees, because the diversity of their employees is ultimately the same as the diversity of their customers and the communities that they're working in. So they're going to need to define what their workers need in terms of knowledge, skills, and abilities, and make sure that their workers can develop those talents throughout their careers. I also think that employers are going to have to do a better job of providing opportunities for workers to serve their communities, again, because human workers actually want to have meaning and purpose.

Jamie Merisotis, Lumina Foundation president & CEO:

In fact, there's data from Gallup that I cite in my book that shows that even for the lowest wage workers, they're willing to give up money for meaning. In other words, they want to say at the end of the day, "My job means something. I'm contributing to a greater good." Even for people at the lowest end of the income spectrum, that tells us something very powerful about what we hope employers will do, which is to provide meaning in terms of the work that their employees are conducting.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Signaling the skills that you have has always been an important part of getting a job, whether it's been a credential or a college degree or a certification. How does an employee, how can a potential employee, signal these human capabilities, this human work? And do employers have to look at it differently now when they interview people?

Jamie Merisotis, Lumina Foundation president & CEO:

I think it's a great question. Part of the moving target here is the nature of the credentials themselves. So we have this continuum of post-high school learning credentials that we've seen. We need more people. We need more, we need better, and we need more equitable. All those things are true when it comes to the credentials, whether they be short-term credentials, associate degrees, the new kinds of credentials that we've seen in terms of new forms of certifications, certificates, or whatever, bachelor's degrees, advanced degrees, et cetera. Within those credentials, all credentials should have a balance between the content and these generalizable human traits and capabilities that I've been talking about. And so I think part of the responsibility is in the hands of the people who are providing the education and training. They have to do a better job of actually articulating, what do these credentials mean? What do they represent?

Jamie Merisotis, Lumina Foundation president & CEO:

This is part of the effort of an initiative that Lumina Foundation has supported called Credential Engine trying to create the greater understanding of what's behind all types of credentials and how you can actually create an understanding of the intersection among different kinds of credentials, so that an individual who gets a certificate or a certification from an employer or from a community-based organization can easily segue into the next credential by being able to get that at a college or university, or what have you. But the idea simply is that these credentials always have to represent the combination of that content, the specific set of knowledge and skills that you need to know about that topic or career area or major, but also be able to build these critical thinking and problem solving and communicating all those human traits and characteristics, those capabilities that I talked about, that are so essential to human work going forward.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Is there a role for the U.S. government in making sure that people are developing this capacity for human work?

Jamie Merisotis, Lumina Foundation president & CEO:

Yeah, I think it's going to be really important for the federal government to be a better connected. And here, I think the federal government and the states really have to be aligned. There's a real complication, I've been talking about this in the COVID context here, that part of the problem that I think we are going to see come January is that more than 40 states require balanced budgets. So states have taken a hit in revenues that is going to be very, very difficult for them to manage. States are in the position of being the primary providers, investors of learning after high school of worker training and higher education. So states are really going to be stymied in this environment because revenues are down, because business is not doing as well. We've had high levels of unemployment, et cetera.

Jamie Merisotis, Lumina Foundation president & CEO:

So I think the federal government is going to have to invest massively in generating more results when it comes to helping people develop the capacity for human work. So they're going to have to invest more in community colleges that are giving people these short-term credentials and associate degrees and things like that in these fields that have been heavily affected by COVID, in retail and hospitality, and some of the others. And more of this investment is going to have to be placed on these human work skills that are necessary for the success that we're looking for in this new economy. I think, at the end of the day, we're going to have to invest in talent because talent is what's going to help us create more prosperity for our country and for our communities. Talent has to be developed and deployed. We have to do that in these post-secondary learning contexts, and the federal government's going to have a very important role to play in making that a reality across the nation.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

In a four year degree or a four year school, it seems there has been more emphasis on a concept of what a job should be and a career should be. Does higher education have to adapt to be more practical, more maybe work-based learning in a broader array of subjects to make sure that people have the skills they need?

Jamie Merisotis, Lumina Foundation president & CEO:

I think so. First, I think higher education will have to adapt, because it's what society is requiring of higher education. Remember that our colleges and universities continue to be the primary drivers of our

workforce in this country. The education and training that you get in higher education is still the major driver of how we develop our human talent and deploy it in this country. But the colleges and universities are going to have to do a couple of things. One is, they're going to have to shed themselves of this notion that if we can just get past this hurdle, everything can go back to whatever normal was before. In a lot of ways, the old normal wasn't very good to begin with, and now we know in this future that people are going to need new skills. They're going to need new ways of engaging their communities, new ways of relating to one another. And we're going to have to really focus on making sure that the colleges and universities are better preparing people for the changing needs of the workforce.

Jamie Merisotis, Lumina Foundation president & CEO:

At the same time, the colleges and universities are going to have to deepen their investment in the changing nature of who they're actually serving. We spend a lot of time in I would call it the macro media narrative talking about people in residential colleges and universities, people in four year institutions, people who are in bachelor's degree programs. Those are important, but the truth is, most of the growth that we're seeing in most of the near term needs is in community colleges and short-term programs. And for people in higher education, whether they are in a community college or whether they're in one of those four year colleges and universities, there are very serious issues that the college and universities haven't done a good enough job of addressing.

Jamie Merisotis, Lumina Foundation president & CEO:

Things like childcare and transportation, and all of the things that people say life gets in the way of their learning. It's especially important for us to take that seriously now that we've seen this tremendous tumult in American society, that is we're going to require a lot more people to go to college, to get a high quality credential, and to make sure that they can continue to be productive as earners, as learners, and ultimately as people providing service to their communities and their country.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I think that last point is very important. It's almost a deeper sense of what work should be. It's not just in an individual. It is a community based idea.

Jamie Merisotis, Lumina Foundation president & CEO:

Yeah, I think I've got this notion that I talk about often in the book that this idea of human work is a virtuous cycle of earning, learning, and serving, and it takes place over the course of your lifetime. Look, Ramona, we're living in a complicated world and things are rarely static. They rarely stay the way that they they've always been. We've got to actually take this idea of human work seriously and we've got to think about human work as reflecting all three of those things, that as humans, we do need to earn, we do need to continuously learn, but we also have this desire of serving others that's very important to us as human workers. And it's a three legged stool, if you will. It's a way of thinking about our own humanity through what we do in work. And at the end of the day, I think that work is about dignity. It's about meaning, it's about purpose.

Jamie Merisotis, Lumina Foundation president & CEO:

Of course, we need to make money. Of course, we need to continue to advance our skills. But at the end of the day, it's about making a contribution, not only to our own well-being, but to the wellbeing of others.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Very well said, Jamie. Thank you so much for joining me on Work In Progress.

Jamie Merisotis, Lumina Foundation president & CEO:

Thanks for having me.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

My guest today, Jamie Merisotis, President and CEO of Lumina Foundation and author of the new book, Human Work in the Age of Smart Machines. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, Editor-in-Chief of WorkingNation. Thank you for listening.