

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:

UpSkill America is an employer led movement to expand opportunity for American workers, Executive Director, Jaime Fall, joins me now to discuss the initiative. Jaime, thank you for joining.

Jaime Fall, UpSkill America executive director:

Thank you, Ramona. It's a pleasure to be here.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So from what I've read, your movement is promoting training and other practices to help workers make sure they can progress in their careers and move into better paying jobs. Why don't you tell me a little bit about the movement and how it came about and we can go from there.

Jaime Fall, UpSkill America executive director:

This really began back in 2015, Ramona. We weren't that far removed from the last recession. And what was happening really is there were so many people who were not experiencing the recovery. Things were fine for a lot of executives and others within companies, but the frontline and entry-level workers, they weren't seeing wage gains and they weren't seeing job creation and they weren't really having opportunities to advance, in many cases because companies had cut their training and education budget so severely after the crash of 2007 and '08.

Jaime Fall, UpSkill America executive director:

So that was really the beginning of UpSkill America. The Obama administration met with a number of organizations to find out what a group of people thought could be done to improve the situation. It was nearing president Obama's second term, so they didn't want it to be a government program that would go away in a year, but they really thought that the solution was within the private sector, that employers needed to be doing more education and training, and really more focused on opening opportunities for people to advance instead of having people be stuck in entry level careers.

Jaime Fall, UpSkill America executive director:

So the day after his 2015 State of the Union address, President Obama called on employers to do more investing in their frontline and entry-level workers and to do more to up-skill America and UpSkill America was launched then, that day.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Who is in the group? Who did you invite in to fulfill that mission of having employers be a part of the up-skilling programs?

Jaime Fall, UpSkill America executive director:

When UpSkill America began, there was a network of seven organizations that worked with employers, that helped to bring employers to the table and understand the importance of this and to commit to the importance of it. Since that time, we've begun working directly with employers. Typically, we work with large national employers, employers that can have a big impact in the workplace. They can affect a lot of workers and also their brand recognition can help get the attention of a lot of other companies and get them to participate in the initiatives as well, and understanding the importance of investing in workers.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Have any programs come out of it? Have you developed specific training programs or programs that maybe they're the best practices?

Jaime Fall, UpSkill America executive director:

So we don't do training ourselves. What we do is work with employers to really create, expand or improve programs. We've worked with a lot of companies around tuition assistance programs. For example, five years ago, a lot more companies had tuition reimbursement programs, where an individual would have to come up with the money, pay for their own tuition, take a course, pay for their second semester's tuition and then file paperwork and wait sometimes six months or more to be reimbursed for the first semester. So if people were able to follow that, it really is a very unworkable system for people who don't have a lot of extra cash lying around. And as we all know, college tuition has gone up extensively and is really out of the reach of a lot of Americans right now. So for example, one of the things we do is help them find intermediaries who will work with them to create tuition reimbursement programs so individuals don't have to pay out of pocket costs.

Jaime Fall, UpSkill America executive director:

That's just one small example of the type of thing that we would work with companies to do. But we really focus on a range of activities that employers do everything from high school completion programs, English language programs, I mentioned college tuition assistance programs, but there's also incumbent worker training, certification programs, and then other employers sometimes engage in their communities and help fund education and training programs for their communities at large. So we talk with employers about those options as well.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Working Nation has a new poll out it's called the American Worker Survey. And we found that 56% of the workers we spoke to say they were unaware of any training programs or how to find them in their community. I think as kind of a startling number, 66% of American workers say they've never been offered any kind of up-skilling by their employers. Do you think that's an accurate assessment, that's the perception from workers that they're not being offered? Do you think there's room to grow in that space?

Jaime Fall, UpSkill America executive director:

Oh, absolutely. The reason that we wanted to spend our time and invest in this type of a program and commit to it is because we absolutely know that more of this needs to be happening. Is 56% the right number? Frankly, Ramona, it doesn't matter. If that's what people perceive to be the case, then that's what it is. And we really do believe that there needs to be a lot more of this happening. Employers need to really understand the value to the individual, to their company and to their communities in investing in workers and really giving them opportunities to advance.

Jaime Fall, UpSkill America executive director:

I think that's another important point I don't want people to lose is, we don't do this trying to convince employers to do a charitable transaction. We absolutely believe that when employers invest in the skills of their workers, it helps them have a better prepared workforce, which helps the company, it helps the workers because they're able to advance into higher wage jobs, and certainly it helps communities as well.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Is there an awareness out there of programs like this that are being offered? Do you think there's something that can be done? I ask this question a lot. I am in the media and we tell stories, but I feel like there's not enough talk about this part of the economy and this part of the job picture that there are programs out there, there are people who are trying to make this work, but they're not getting enough attention.

Jaime Fall, UpSkill America executive director:

I completely agree with that assessment of the situation, Ramona. I think really where... Well, one area I should say, where this breaks down is with high school guidance counselors. I think there are so many guidance counselors who are overworked. They're trying to serve too many students. They're just stretched so thinly. So I don't mean this to be a criticism of them, but I just don't think they're aware of the opportunities that people have if they can't afford a college degree by themselves. I would love for there to be more guidance counselors working with people to really understand the employers that are going to invest in them and help them get connected to those employers.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

We actually found too in the study that about a third of the people we talked to had never, ever actually talked to an adult, whether it was their parent or a teacher, about pathways to good careers, which feels like it should happen when you're a teen, even maybe even younger, but at least a teen, high school, where people can start putting you on that right path to find a job. And it doesn't mean you have to go to college, it just means that you have to know where you're going. Are there programs out there that might satisfy what your career goals are?

Jaime Fall, UpSkill America executive director:

Yeah. That's a travesty to hear that. Young people aren't getting the advice that they need. I'm not shocked by that, but it's just horrible to think that people, beginning at 16 years of age, trying to make a decision about their future and they aren't getting good advice. In a previous job, in some of the work that we did, we were actually convinced that parents were some of the worst guidance counselors that students could have, especially for parents who hadn't gone through college. They would just know a few friends who had been successful and try to steer their children in that way, or not really understand the use of labor market information and how that can really help tell a story for young people.

Jaime Fall, UpSkill America executive director:

But that's one of the things that I've been very encouraged by also over the last five years, Ramona, is the number of employers that are investing in really quality guidance counseling to help people understand options that are available for them, both within the company where they work now and beyond that company, to try to help them make better career decisions and not so much pick a college

degree or a certification that you would enjoy, but pick a college degree or certification that you would enjoy and that you're qualified for and that you are kind of cut out for, if you will, but also that's going to lead to good job opportunities after you complete them.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

How would an employer interested in getting some of the best practices from your group, how would they go about that? How do they get in touch? Is it a certain size of company that you deal with?

Jaime Fall, UpSkill America executive director:

We'll work with any company, but just because of our resources, we've typically worked with larger companies because that's where we could have a greater impact. It's so hard for us to reach multiple small companies at once and really be able to affect the number of employees that we want to. But would be happy to work with the companies that are interested in this or get them connected to others in their local area that can help them. There are a lot of good resources out there.

Jaime Fall, UpSkill America executive director:

I guess I would recommend that companies start or individuals start looking at our upskillamerica.org website. There's a lot of valuable information on there, including an up-skilling playbook for employers that companies could look at and try to get some ideas. And then if we can help them beyond that, just reach out through an email, which is also available on our website, would love to hear from folks and try to help where we can.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

One of the things that we've talked about is the impact COVID has had on the workforce and employers. So the speed at which change is happening, it's accelerated, the companies have learned that there are different ways that they can serve their customers, create their products, but it all kind of comes down to, it's even more obvious that it's coming down to the fact that digital skills are very, very important and getting workers that access to those skills would seem to be a priority for employers.

Jaime Fall, UpSkill America executive director:

Absolutely. So there's always been the problem of employers being able to help people have access to both technology equipment, as well as just a reasonable internet service that provides good quality service for them. Employers have talked about that for a while. That's certainly been part of my conversations as I've talked to employers that have decided to invest in free college courses or certification courses for their workers, only to find out that so many people can't really access the internet the way that they need to in order to be able to complete online programs.

Jaime Fall, UpSkill America executive director:

So again, that's always or for a number of years, been a major issue. But what we've really learned from companies in some of our recent conversations with them is, in being pressed and so many people working remotely, companies have really made a lot of changes to a number of HR practices, if you will, the way that they post their jobs, the way that they interview people for the jobs, the way that they onboard people, the way that people are now being allowed to work remotely. And what we've really understood with companies is that unless people have a reasonable technology and access to the internet, they may not be able to even successfully compete for a job right now. So the imperative of

having a good digital access for folks and making sure people have at least a minimum level of digital skills is really critical at this time.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

What kind of skills are employers telling you now that they're looking for? What kind of skills do they need in the current and future workforce?

Jaime Fall, UpSkill America executive director:

We've heard so much from employers, Ramona, about the digital skills that they need. I already had an opportunity to mention this just basic level of being able to go on the internet, being able to find information, having access to the technology, to communicate and to learn in the digital environment. That's really a skill that everyone in the workforce almost needs. So beyond that though, we heard so many things from companies about being able to take technology and understand how it's affecting the workplace, to be able to implement a piece of technology in the workplace. Also, there's so much need for people who have design skills, who can make websites and graphics and other things look good. People who can analyze data is another important point. People who can program different languages. People who can set up networks and make sure the networks are running. All the way up to people who are working in labs and who are innovators trying to find the next great thing using technology. That whole range of digital skills are things that we heard so much from employers.

Jaime Fall, UpSkill America executive director:

In addition to that, Ramona, we also heard from so many of the employers that we're talking to about just the array of the ways that technology and different digital skills are becoming needed in the workforce. We talked to retail companies that are rolling out healthcare. So there are going to be people doing more healthcare remotely. So many workers who have worked in a clinical setting now might be working in a retail setting, or they might be providing more healthcare in the home. And there is going to be more need for technology. More doctors and doctor's offices are working with online video appointments. So that's changing the technology needs within healthcare. In manufacturing, we heard a lot about companies rolling out smart factories as a result of just trying to keep people healthy in the workplace in needing more space between workers, going to more automated systems.

Jaime Fall, UpSkill America executive director:

We certainly heard in the restaurant industry about how they're rolling out more technology. So people can order from the table and there's less interaction with the waiters and waitresses, keeping them safe and keeping the diners safe. So many different uses that we've heard about technology and digital skills. I think, once we go back to normal, whatever that is, Ramona, we're going to see that normal is very different than what it used to be. Our interactions in restaurants, healthcare, with technology, whatever it might be. We're going through changes right now that are going to be with us for years to come.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And what is UpSkill America doing to support employers and programs that might be helping get those skills to the workers that need them?

Jaime Fall, UpSkill America executive director:

It's a result of all of the conversations that we've had through a study that we're doing that's been sponsored by Strada Education Network and Walmart. We've really come to understand the value and the need for more focus on digital skill development. So we're working with Digital Us to create an employer network advancing digital skills and equity. We're in the process now of bringing employers into that network. And we're going to be formally announcing it late in January.

Jaime Fall, UpSkill America executive director:

We're really excited about the work that we're going to be doing to really understand how employers define digital skills and how they identify the ones most in demand, how they invest in building skills in their communities and in their workforce, which existing resources they're using to develop and assess digital skills, and then really getting that information out to the larger employer network and to people who work with employers and, hopefully, developing some tools to help more employers be better about developing digital skills within their workforce.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

That's fantastic. I'm glad to hear that. Working Nation is also a partner with Digital Us and we have relationships with some of the other groups that you've mentioned there. We too believe that's a very important issue and we'll be happy to share that information on our website as well once it comes out.

Jaime Fall, UpSkill America executive director:

Thank you. I really appreciate that. We just have, over the years, way before me at the Aspen Institute, just have absolutely learned the value of peer to peer networks. And so that's what we're trying to do here is bring together the employers who are focused on this, who are committed to it. Even those that know they want to do better and try to develop that network so companies can learn from one another and then share that information out so we can all be better equipped to do more of this more quickly.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

There's been talk about the importance of skills over degrees. For an employer to be able to telegraph what they actually need in a job seems to have become even more critical. Is that part of a conversation that you might be having with employers?

Jaime Fall, UpSkill America executive director:

Well, I'm a big fan of the work that Markle in their Skillful initiative. I think what they're doing to really get employers to understand the importance of skills and talking in the skills language is so critical right now. So we certainly try to connect any employers that we can to that effort and again, promote their materials and do other things. We don't want to recreate the work that they're doing, but I just think their work is fantastic and really important right now. And sadly, I think employers have done a very poor job of talking about the skills that people need. They've relied too much on degrees in their position descriptions and people's past work histories versus the skills that individuals have.

Jaime Fall, UpSkill America executive director:

So this is a long overdue change, and I'm glad to see it coming. And I just hope that the Markle Foundation and the Skillful initiative, that they have great success with the work that they're doing and I want continue to support that any way I can.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

What to you is success for your organization? What is your ultimate goal?

Jaime Fall, UpSkill America executive director:

Our ultimate goal is that we just want people to have opportunities to advance from the jobs that they're in. First of all, there's another part of the economic opportunities within the Aspen Institute where UpSkill America is located, that's focused on job quality. Job quality right now is such an important topic, making sure people at entry-level jobs have reasonable pay and benefits and enough to sustain a family. So, that's one important point that I want to be sure I mention. But long-term success for us would be from whatever job an individual is in, especially these frontline and entry-level workers that are disproportionately female and people of color, that they would know where they can get education and training opportunities within their own company. Their employers would be paying for that in a way that benefits the individuals and the employers, and people would be able to have good career progression within their companies and understand what the career pathways are, and again, access to those opportunities.

Jaime Fall, UpSkill America executive director:

I don't want anyone to be trapped in a low wage entry-level job and not having opportunities to advance. Just right now in 2021, what's driving me is making sure that the essential workers of 2020 don't become the forgotten workers of 2021 as soon as we have vaccines available for everyone. We've had so many people put their lives at risk, do heroic things to make sure our economy can continue to go and that people can have access to the things that they need, in many cases, putting themselves at greater risk. And I just want to make sure that they know now and in the future that there are opportunities for them to advance and that they're being rewarded for what they've done for our nation.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I couldn't agree more. That's a good way to end this, Jaime. Thank you so much for the conversation.

Jaime Fall, UpSkill America executive director:

Thank you, Ramona. I really appreciate the time. Thank you for the work that you're doing and look forward to a continued conversation with you.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Our guest today has been Jaime Fall, Executive Director of UpSkill America, and I'm Ramona Schindelheim, Editor-in-Chief of Working Nation. Thank you for listening.