

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 now is Ben Wildavsky, Senior Vice President of National Engagement at Strada Education Network. Ben, great to have you here.

Ben Wildavsky, Strada SVP of National Engagement:

Thanks for having me Ramona.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

As we move into 2021, I want to talk about some of the challenges facing the workforce. A lot of them have come to light. I think a lot of them have been in the system already, but with the massive unemployment and the focus on racial inequity, it feels like a lot of it has come to the surface now, and we are looking at these challenges with new eyes. So I want to talk to you a little bit about what are you seeing? What are you looking at right now?

Ben Wildavsky, Strada SVP of National Engagement:

Well, look, I mean, challenges is kind of an understatement, right? The economy has just been terrible. The recession, COVID, a lot of real human suffering behind all the bad economic figures. I'd say some of these, as you mentioned this, some of these are preexisting sort of concerns, but they've really been amplified and speed it up by COVID and the recession. Just to sort of briefly review some of them, we of course have this recession. What that really means for the labor market of course is lots of lost jobs, but also very fast changing needs in terms of which sectors actually might have some openings and might need people with certain kinds of skills where there may or may not be a good supply.

Ben Wildavsky, Strada SVP of National Engagement:

In general we continue to have this real disconnect between supply and demand for skilled workers. Equity of course has been a huge concern for the country this year in particular. This really comes up a lot when you look at people's pathways between education and training and work, and not always having the kind of access or the kind of guidance or navigation assistance, they need to find the right pathway. People talking past each other, but between the employer world and the education world, not necessarily having a common language to match skills with demand.

Ben Wildavsky, Strada SVP of National Engagement:

Then there's a lot of different players involved in the supply and demand. That could be everybody from the individuals who were looking for work or trying to improve their skills. They call it re-skilling or up-skilling. The education providers who are trying to make sure that their programs are relevant and useful. The employers who are trying to figure out the kinds of people they need, and how do they reach out the right places to get the kind of talent they need. So there's just many different challenges ahead of us.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Employers, they've had to shift so much over these last nine months. Do you think that they are at this point able to very clearly state what they need? Because I think that's a key important starting point before you could even talk about what education can do to help the workforce.

Ben Wildavsky, Strada SVP of National Engagement:

It varies. I think that the knock on employers sometimes from, let's say the higher ed side is, they want the people with the skills that they need for the opening that they have right this minute, or that the person they're going to need to walk in the door tomorrow, but they may not be thinking longer term. Economists talk about human capital. The kind of human capital that they're going to need in terms of, maybe it's the analytical skills or people talk about the soft skills or the human skills, which might be communicating, working well with other people, leadership. There's a lot of things which are actually also quite important to many employers, but which they don't necessarily make their top priority. And they don't always articulate that effectively.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

One of the things in this new report that you have just put out on Bridge Builders, is talking about the role of an intermediary. Can you define what is an intermediary in this report?

Ben Wildavsky, Strada SVP of National Engagement:

Well, it's a great question. One of the reasons we call the report Bridge Builders is, bridge builders feels like a little less of a wonky term than intermediary, but we also decided look, intermediary is a term that's very commonly used in the field. We decided we should just own it. So we do use it in the report, but a bridge builder is a little more descriptive. Intermediaries basically bring people together. You can call them bridge builders, you can call them conveners. They span boundaries. It's a little bit like, I don't know if this analogy is perfect. But when there's a really complex, legal case, sometimes there'll be some kind of a mediation. Where many different parties have to come to the table together to hash out their differences and come up with what you hope will be a workable solution.

Ben Wildavsky, Strada SVP of National Engagement:

In a sense, an intermediary is like that. They're getting the right parties at the table. The wrinkle is that sometimes an intermediary, because they take so many different forms, they could be one of the parties. So sometimes higher education can take the lead in being an intermediary. Sometimes employers can take the lead. A lot of chambers of commerce are very involved in this work. So they can take many different forms. One of the things that's great about them is whether it's a nonprofit intermediary or an employer or an education provider, they can tailor the work they do, and the specific details of who they bring together. Based on the needs of the community, or the region, or the state that they're working in. So they can be very tailored.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Could you share with me some examples of intermediaries that have been effective in the past? What are they doing right?

Ben Wildavsky, Strada SVP of National Engagement:

We really did try in this report to really come up with some really specific examples of where intermediaries, both in the United States and in a bunch of other countries, where they've been

successful. Because that doesn't mean that everyone's doing it right, but it means that we have some really good models of what's already been working. So this isn't something that people have to invent from scratch. I'll just give you like a very basic example, one example that I really like. Well, there's a couple of reasons I like it. I mean, when you're working on a report, we have some really fantastic global experts from different parts of the world. People who'd worked at places like the world bank or the OECD, really knew a lot. But we did not want this to appear to be something where the rest of the world has all the answers and we in the States are backward.

Ben Wildavsky, Strada SVP of National Engagement:

We don't know anything because in fact, there's a lot happening in the United States that's really been very effective. One example I really like is in Mobile, Alabama. They've been very effective in attracting some really big employers. There's a European aircraft manufacturer, Airbus. There's engineering company from Norway. There's a stainless steel producer from Finland. Mobile has a very large deep water port. It's the ninth biggest in the States. They appeared to have a very successful local education infrastructure. Public schools with high graduation rates, public community colleges, public university nearby. So there seemed to be every reason why it was going to be a great setting. But it turned out that as these companies came in they started discovering it was really hard for them to find the talent that they needed.

Ben Wildavsky, Strada SVP of National Engagement:

It turned out that the high school system had sort of been inflating its graduation rate. A lot of students who didn't graduate either weren't going to college, or if they went to college they would drop out, or they would maybe try to transfer from community college, but they would find their credits weren't accepted. So there were just a lot of problems with the sort of the way the education system was working, or not working on the ground to get people better education and to help meet the kinds of needs of the employer community. So what happened is a bunch of different community organizations got together. They were civic organizations, industry organizations, churches were involved, and they set a very specific goal. They wanted to have 75,000 Mobile residents earn new degrees by 2030.

Ben Wildavsky, Strada SVP of National Engagement:

They worked through this small nonprofit, it's called the Mobile Area Education Foundation. That's the intermediary. They helped coordinate all these different constituencies. They created this campaign called Graduate Ready. It's really been extremely effective. The businesses have been involved, working with the education providers to try to design programs of study that are really in sync with what people need in the workplace. They have also added some components that we know are often very helpful for students and for businesses like internships, apprenticeships. They even would let's say, send employees into the schools to be reading buddies. So they really tried to sort of break down some of those walls to try to bring these different worlds closer together.

Ben Wildavsky, Strada SVP of National Engagement:

At the higher ed level, universities did things like simplify the transfer process, for people who are trying to transfer from community colleges, so that people weren't spending a lot of money getting credits that they couldn't end up counting toward a degree. They were doing things like, there was sometimes a tendency to say, "Oh, you shouldn't take too many credits per semester, because it's going to be too hard on you." Which is actually a false kindness, because it turns out that you really have to stay on track to graduate if you really want to have a good chance of graduating.

Ben Wildavsky, Strada SVP of National Engagement:

So long story short, after all of these changes were made, the high school graduation rates went way up. The number of students who transferred from community colleges to the public university, more than tripled. They basically created a mechanism through this intermediary to try to make some of the changes that were needed. But the individuals or individual institutions couldn't necessarily see on their own. There's this old thing, if everyone's in charge, no one's in charge. I think one of the things that really works well with successful intermediaries is they just perform this coordinating role, which doesn't sound super sexy, but it's actually incredibly important.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

That's a fantastic example. It shows how having that intermediary can really help, but also just the collaboration that sounds like it was going on between the companies and the community and the education system there. Fantastic. I'd be looking forward to seeing 2030, the outcomes of this whole [inaudible 00:00:10:59] experiment.

Ben Wildavsky, Strada SVP of National Engagement:

Absolutely.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So important thing in there that I was thinking, as we were talking earlier too, is the inequitable access to some pathways. Is Mobile an example of how that was addressed, or is there another example that can show us how making those pathways and those opportunities accessible for everyone is really important in this whole recovery area?

Ben Wildavsky, Strada SVP of National Engagement:

Yeah. I mean, I think mobile is an example of that. Of course here's where, of course I inevitably I'm going to say, "Well, if you read the report because it's got tons of examples from across the US and all the other countries as well." I'd say, depending on how you define equity, they're not all necessarily about race, or ethnic equity, that's often a component. But more broadly, it's equity for people who have not been getting great opportunities, whoever they are. So, I mean, thinking in the UK, for example, there's something called the Civic University Commission. They created a network called the Civic University Network, where they got more than a hundred universities working together while they were contending with, because a lot of universities just were not really closely connected with their local communities. Where there were often some real economic problems.

Ben Wildavsky, Strada SVP of National Engagement:

So local people were not getting the kind of access to education and training that would really help them in the workforce. The university has really stepped up and tried to make a better effort to do that. So just one other UK example, in Manchester, which is related, they found that the area that was really growing around there with a lot of better paid jobs and fast growing jobs, were in technology, digital stuff. But they would bring in a lot of people from outside the area because local people did not necessarily have those skills. So one of the things that happened through this effort, through an intermediary was to really try to create better access to courses in school, in local educational institutions that would give people some of those kinds of skills that were really in demand. So I guess I would say that really is a form of equity as well.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Overall, do you think education is rising to the occasion? Do you think they're finding new ways to help create a dynamic up-skilled workforce?

Ben Wildavsky, Strada SVP of National Engagement:

In the United States, of course we have a very vast and really varied post-secondary education system. Everything from huge numbers of community colleges, to large state universities, to sort of the much more selective research oriented state flagships, to the privates, which in turn can be the super elite. Research oriented privates to the small school, sometimes religious schools that may be really good at teaching, but aren't necessarily big in the research. So we just have a lot of different kinds of things going on. So whether or not people are rising to the occasion really depends. I guess, one way to think about it is this. You can think of reform as working within the system, and trying to create new and better systems. So I would say working within the system, there is certainly a very wide recognition that we need to do a better job.

Ben Wildavsky, Strada SVP of National Engagement:

Getting more people into education after high school, because the economy has changed and it's become more and more important to have some post-secondary education. We also know that there's a huge problem with non-completion of degrees, for example. So there's a lot of efforts being made by many different colleges and universities to improve retention and completion, and to really try to avoid the situation where you have people graduating with debt, but no degree, which is really the worst of both worlds. So there's a lot of stuff happening to try to keep this sort of existing system to really make it function better. That would include, I think people who are really being thoughtful, who'll try to give students exposure to the kinds of work opportunities they might have in the future. We'll try to recognize the fact that most people go to college because they're interested in their careers.

Ben Wildavsky, Strada SVP of National Engagement:

That's a very big motivator, but at the same time, there's just a lot of work going on, on a sort of different track, which is like, let's rethink the system. Maybe we need to break down some of those barriers. Reduce some of the credential-ism that makes people expect credentials for jobs that perhaps don't need them. So there's a lot of research and thinking going on about how can you get people to hire more for skills? How can you do away with credential requirements when they're not really necessary? I think you can certainly make the case for both reforming the system from within and trying to carve out new ways of doing things. But ultimately you don't have to pick. It's not going to be either or. It's going to be both and.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

The work you've done over the years in education, and now at Strada, is that a mind-shift though? I mean, I've always heard that higher education is rigid in the way things should be.

Ben Wildavsky, Strada SVP of National Engagement:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

There's some very longstanding beliefs. I feel like, with the people I've talked to, I've seen this mind-shift over the last couple of years. Again, as you use the word accelerated by the pandemic.

Ben Wildavsky, Strada SVP of National Engagement:

It's kind of, is the glass half full or is it half empty? Look, I have a lot of fondness for higher education, but I also have a real recognition of all the ways in which it falls short and needs to be reformed, right? I think that there are certainly people who just don't want to talk about careers, or people's professional prospects, because they're really only interested in a very pure notion of the life of the mind. That's slow to change in some places, but I think increasingly universities and colleges, whether or not they use this exact language, they're in a marketplace. They're trying to attract students. They're trying to come up with things that will get people to enroll. They certainly, I think, they want their graduates to be successful, however the graduates need to find that.

Ben Wildavsky, Strada SVP of National Engagement:

If you look at the most popular majors, people may say that academics are all kind of in the ivory tower, but business, I think is by far the most popular undergraduate major in the country. Whatever you think of business as a major, that's a fact. I think STEM is of course very popular, computer science. So I think that the offerings have certainly moved in the direction where consumer demand is. The question I think is partly a little broader, which is whether or not we might make it easier for people to do certain kinds of work while they're in school. Whether it's apprenticeships or internships. Whether it's getting credit for certain kinds of experience. Basically there's a lot of different factors that sort of fall under the category of both guidance and opportunities to sort of test the waters to see.

Ben Wildavsky, Strada SVP of National Engagement:

Maybe if you're an English major, maybe you can get some experience in a summer job where you'll see, what does it really mean to sort of synthesize complex information and communicate it clearly. How can you draw the connection between some of the really useful stuff you're doing in your English classes when you're doing literary analysis, but you might try to understand a little more clearly how that's going to carry over into the working world. And I think that doesn't take away from the pursuit of knowledge or the truth, but it can be really appealing to students who are looking for those connections between education and the world they're going to be living in afterward.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

As we move into 2021, as we begin the year, do you feel optimistic that we can address these challenges, and that we're going to be able to create a stronger post COVID economy?

Ben Wildavsky, Strada SVP of National Engagement:

I would like to think of myself as an optimist overall. Look, there's a lot of things that I can't claim to have any... I wish I had some insight into the vaccines and the post COVID world and all that stuff. I don't. I think we're moving in a good direction, but we'll see what happens with the facts on the ground. I think in with education, this country really does have, I think, a great historical trajectory of moving toward greater, and greater access and opportunity to education. Does not mean it has been perfect by any means, there are still lots of inequity and lots of problems that remain. But if you look at just things like high school graduation becoming just increasingly common in the last 100 years, going on to post-secondary education becoming more and more common.

Ben Wildavsky, Strada SVP of National Engagement:

People earning degrees, whether associates or four year degrees also become more, and more common. The variety of people learning those degrees, not a great variety as it should be, but it's definitely improved over the last 50 years. So a big picture way of looking at it, as I think that the historical patterns are all there. If we can continue in that direction, more access, more completion, more credentials that really have the kind of value that people are looking for. I think that there's reason to be optimistic.

Ben Wildavsky, Strada SVP of National Engagement:

In the near term, a sort of very different way of answering your question is, I think that in a marketplace where there's been really declining enrollment. We know this from the studies that we do at Strada, a lot of people really believe they're going to need more education to get back on their feet or to advance in the workforce, but they're not quite sure what they need and how to go about it. There is a real need for navigation assistance. We're going to see some institutions stepping up. I think we have others where... Something like intermediaries are really going to be necessary, to just put the right people together. To show what needs to be done.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Ben, I appreciate you taking the time to share your thoughts and your insight on the subject with me. Thank you for being candid about your answers.

Ben Wildavsky, Strada SVP of National Engagement:

Well, it was my pleasure. I really enjoyed, Ramona. Thanks for having me.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

My thanks today to Ben Wildavsky, Senior Vice President of National Engagement at Strada Education Network. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, Editor-in-Chief of WorkingNation. Thank you for listening.