

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:

The COVID pandemic has impacted frontline workers, particularly those with lower paid jobs, very severely. A new organization, SkillUp Coalition, is working to make sure that they can find a path out of this pandemic and become a strong part of the economic recovery. Joining me right now to talk about this is Steve Lee. He's the brand new Executive Director of SkillUp.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Steve, congratulations and thanks for joining us.

Steve Lee, SkillUp Coalition executive director:

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

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And I'd love to hear in your own words, what the heart of your mission is?

Steve Lee, SkillUp Coalition executive director:

So SkillUp was launched in the wake of COVID when we realized that there are tens of millions of Americans, who because of the pandemic, have been impacted financially, because they've either lost their jobs, they've been furloughed, they've been laid off, et cetera. Our mission is very simple, it's to help those who are on the downward slope of the K base recovery of COVID. The populations that we want to help was impacted even before COVID, it's just COVID has exacerbated and put a shining light on some of the inequalities that exist and we, SkillUp, want to help some of those folks who have been impacted into a better life. The end goal is to get someone into a better career, and we do that by four relatively, or at least we hope, relatively simple steps.

Steve Lee, SkillUp Coalition executive director:

First, we have a technology which we think is relatively straightforward, which will guide someone through the journey of getting into a better career. Second, when the participant thinks this is a career that I want to choose, we connect them to a best in class training provider who will provide them skillsets to get the job. Then we offer some financial support to the participants who may just need to pay for a laptop, or to actually pay for the tuition of our program. And then lastly, we connect them to employers to actually get the job. And through that four step process, our goal is to help tens of millions of Americans get the type of job that we believe is sort of in demand and has capacity for growth in the future.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Who makes up the coalition? Where are we getting all this support from?

Steve Lee, SkillUp Coalition executive director:

The coalition is three or four main stakeholders. The first stakeholder are operating partners, those who have expertise and the knowledge set within this landscape of helping people get back to, or to build into better careers. These are all organizations that have a long history of trying to help low-income workers across America and to train them into their jobs. They help us frame what the model should look like.

Steve Lee, SkillUp Coalition executive director:

Second, we have funders and thought partners who give us both their resources and their time in order to offer us and develop the model and the products to help [inaudible 00:03:17]. And then lastly, and probably most importantly, we have the on the ground partners. We have the partners who train people to get into better employment, and that sort of ecosystem of on the ground is not just working with participants to train them, but also working with employers to connect the participants to those types of jobs. And I would argue that that's probably the most important element of all this, because what happens on the ground is most important, because you're dealing directly with the people that we're trying to help.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Today you're launching your first pilot program in Los Angeles. Tell us what this program will be made up of.

Steve Lee, SkillUp Coalition executive director:

It'll be made up of a marketing push to get Los Angeles onto the SkillUp ecosystem. It'll be made up of folks who hopefully log in into SkillUp Los Angeles to take advantage of some of the things that SkillUp has. It will give them the ability to take a career journey into hopefully a new and better career for themselves. It will consist of Goodwill Southern California as the on the ground provider.

Steve Lee, SkillUp Coalition executive director:

If the connection is made for Goodwill to start providing services for this individual who sort of takes that step, it will also come with up to \$1,000 that will be given to the non-profit, in this case Goodwill, to pay for things that the participant might need and which the participant need not payback. And then it will consist of a training program, that in this case Goodwill provide, ultimately leading to a job in a high demand or in demand career.

Steve Lee, SkillUp Coalition executive director:

So, that's the journey that we will literally start come February 2nd. And our hope is to help thousands of Los Angelenos to take that journey over time.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

If I'm an unemployed frontline worker, low income worker, or I'm still employed and I just want to find a different pathway, how are you making that happen?

Steve Lee, SkillUp Coalition executive director:

We hope that they go onto SkillUp network, and by the way, every city that we're working with has their own local SkillUp site. So in Los Angeles, it's SkillUp Los Angeles. Once they get onto the site, we provide

an easy pathway for them to do either one of two things. One is just, Hey, here are some jobs that are actually available that you might want to apply for.

Steve Lee, SkillUp Coalition executive director:

Second, and probably more important, is a career journey map that gets someone from just interest in doing something to a place where they actually take action. So once I go onto the landing page and we ask them to take a short quiz to give some assessment of who they are, we ask them to sign up via email, and then from that a notification will be sent to them by our partner who's sort of on the ground and they'll say, "Hey, let us connect." And through that connection the hope is that this participant participates in a training program that this non-profit provider will provide on the ground.

Steve Lee, SkillUp Coalition executive director:

In addition to their training, we're also trying to raise money for a fund where the participant, through the non-profit, will get up to \$1,000 in cash to cover some of the needs that the participants may have, but just can't afford. Things like a laptop or tuition and things of that sort. And then lastly, the non-profit will help them connect to that job through the employer and we'll help them with things like resume building or career coaching, things of that sort, all to help them land that job.

Steve Lee, SkillUp Coalition executive director:

That's a process that we want someone to work with and in Los Angeles, that non-profit provider is Goodwill Southern California that provides that whole ecosystem support to help participants on that journey.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

How long do you anticipate the pilot program playing out before you can roll it out in other cities?

Steve Lee, SkillUp Coalition executive director:

We are trying to learn and run at the same time. We will soon launch in three other jurisdictions within the next month while we continue to sort of begin the early stages of Los Angeles. And so come March, we should be four regions across the country, all learning in sort of real-time across those four regions. All will probably take a few months and we'll learn hopefully what works and doesn't work in Los Angeles and the other three jurisdictions. And then while we do that, we're also going to run at the same time and hopefully launch in a few other cities, and let's say by the summer time.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

We're finding that a lot of these jobs that are out on the frontline are lower paid jobs, they've been defined as essential workers.

Steve Lee, SkillUp Coalition executive director:

Yeah.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Until now we didn't really call them essential workers, we're not paying them as essential workers. Where's the disconnect?

Steve Lee, SkillUp Coalition executive director:

It's such a good question, Ramona. I think if you ask different people, they'll give you different answers. I've been in this space for roughly about 12 years in philanthropy, and I think part of it is misinformation. Participants who may think about their next career just may not know of the availability of options that could get you into that new career. And all the data suggests there are tens of millions of jobs across the country, tens of thousands in Los Angeles, that would be a step up that are available, but sometimes I get the sense people don't know about that.

Steve Lee, SkillUp Coalition executive director:

I think second is that the process of doing something in terms of upscaling, it's not an easy process. And so there's a journey that needs to get taken. I get the sense that sometimes that journey can be long, it might be onerous.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And intimidating.

Steve Lee, SkillUp Coalition executive director:

And intimidating. Absolutely intimidate, like really, can I be an engineer? Really? Like, can I be a nurse? Because I feel like, you know, I've known workers in the past 12 years and they're hard-working, they're gentle, they're family people, but this idea of going into that next level is, maybe it's misinformation. Maybe they just don't feel like they can actually get there.

Steve Lee, SkillUp Coalition executive director:

And so you have these barriers, which are both real and imagine, and our goal at SkillUp is to strip away some of those barriers. If the barrier is cash, we want to strip away some of those barriers. If the barrier is guidance and support, we want to strip away those barriers, right? If the barrier is fear and intimidation, we want to strip away those barriers.

Steve Lee, SkillUp Coalition executive director:

And that last one, we're thinking about doing career coaches. They can provide sort of coaching and mentorship. There are, I would say, a litany of barriers that are real and sometimes imagined that make it difficult for someone to take that first step. And we want to strip away as many of those barriers as possible so that they can actually take that step. And once you take that first step, then you're more prone to take that second step, et cetera. But the hard part is taking that first step. And so our hope is that some will take that first step.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You mentioned the program here in Los Angeles, where I am, is just starting. What opportunities are out there? What kind of fields are available?

Steve Lee, SkillUp Coalition executive director:

That's a great question. I think there are quite a few fields available. I think the ones that we've been sort of targeting are areas related to, for example, pharmacy tech or pharmacy. We have been in conversations with a big retailer. There are in Southern California, tens of thousands of pharmacy assistant jobs that they would like to fill. And so we are trying to work with them to fill those slots.

Steve Lee, SkillUp Coalition executive director:

IT support type positions, again, through industries, through Los Angeles, whether they be Hollywood or others, where they're sort of IT support mechanisms, and so I think those are sort of two areas that we're focused on is their pharmacy assistance, IT support, at least as a starting point to get people sort of into the process. And as we build and grow and build greater relationships, we'll add more sort of the business units into the fold.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Expanding out across the country from talking local, do you see the same kind of opportunities out there? Are there different fields in different communities?

Steve Lee, SkillUp Coalition executive director:

I come from New York City. The answer is 100% yes. And so our goal is to expand nationwide. Our goal is to do it thoughtfully but quickly, and I think we'll do it, one, from learning about what happens in Los Angeles, and we are running a few other pilots, one in the Bay area, one in Louisiana, one in Central Florida. And I think those will happen relatively quickly. And I think hopefully we can learn, we'll learn from things we do well, we'll learn from things we don't do well. And then I think our ambition is to add another layer of, let's say a dozen sites, across the country.

Steve Lee, SkillUp Coalition executive director:

I think the way it will work is that each city is different. So New York City, which is where I live, the healthcare sector is huge. So things like nursing jobs or working in hospitals, radar technicians, x-ray technicians, those types of jobs are really paramount because the city has so many hospitals. The great thing about SkillUp is that there's some standardization. There's a website that we have, they'll be localized, but the rubric is the same and the process will be the same, but the localization has happened and will make it bespoke, if you will, to a particular city, but the bones will be the same across the country. And I think that's sort of a foundation of national, but Bespoke City, a local level, is really the right way to go about it because you have an infrastructure that's both in place, but hopefully you can address the localization needs of a particular city.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And Steve, you said that your background is in philanthropy. Tell me a little bit about what your path was to SkillUp.

Steve Lee, SkillUp Coalition executive director:

Sure. So I started very young in the startup space, founded an educational technology company, ran it for five years and then left to work in consulting, strategy consulting for about four years. And this was out on the West Coast, I was in the Bay Area. And then my wife and I had a thought, because for family considerations, to move to New York. And when I moved here, I really had the thought that I should think about philanthropy. And by a mere whim, having done some volunteer work, I joined about 12 and a half years ago, a foundation called Robin Hood here in New York City, which is the largest private foundation in New York city. And for 12 years or so, worked with adults at Robin Hood, largely in this sort of workforce space. And over that time, I've learned that the work is both incredibly rewarding, but also challenging.

Steve Lee, SkillUp Coalition executive director:

And so, you know, one of the things, I'm going to share something maybe a little bit personal, by hopefully in my resume, one of the grantees that I used to work with, she said, "Steve, I love what Robin Hood does, I really do. But what Robin Hood does really, really well is we help people live better in poverty." And so I thought about this for a second, I said, "Is that what philanthropy actually want to do? Do we want to help people live better in poverty?" And the reality is that the folks we're trying to help, they are fluctuating on the borderline of poverty. And for all the reasons we just spoke about before, because lack of information, there's maybe a fear factor, they don't know where to turn to, not enough support services to get them to the next level.

Steve Lee, SkillUp Coalition executive director:

And if I think about what transforms family's lives, and just as important their children's lives, the stuff that SkillUp does, or the work that SkillUp is doing, I think is one of two pillars do that. One pillar being education, how do we teach our kids better? But the second is how do we transform people's careers and lives so that they can measurably and sustainably lift themselves out of poverty. And I think that's what SkillUp does. At least that's what it's endeavoring to do, is to create that transformational change and not make it such that people just live better in poverty.

Steve Lee, SkillUp Coalition executive director:

And if we can do that, then I think for me personally, the goal is multi-generational. Because then maybe the children of these families can do better in life and then their children's children. And that's how you create some level of change within the country, even if it's a baby step now.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Steve, that's a great personal mission and I love hearing that you've taken what you've already been doing for all those years, 12 years, and now taking it to another step, and you know, at a time when it's very much needed. So I applaud you, that's wonderful.

Steve Lee, SkillUp Coalition executive director:

Thank you, Ramona, for giving us a platform to share the work that we do. I feel like all of us who are sort of in this space, and I don't want to repeat myself, but creating transformational change is what I think SkillUp is about. And if I think about what I call the [inaudible 00:15:54] if we as society, don't think about this, but for this, what would happen? It would mean that the folks who are get on the bottom rung of that KK ship economy, post COVID, we'll continue to be on that downward slope.

Steve Lee, SkillUp Coalition executive director:

And what I want to do is I want to put them on the upward slope. The upward slope that many who, to be very honest, have benefited from what's happened because of the pandemic. We want to take the ones who are on that downward slope into a better place. And that is tens of millions of people across the country. And if we can help in some small way, so change that slope into something better, then I think we've done ourselves at least some service. So that's how I would like to add. I'm thrilled about the possibilities, I'm realistic about the challenges. But again, this is one of probably two things that I can think about, like incredible and transformational change, and just thank you for giving us the platform to be able to share this story.

Work in Progress Episode 166 – Steve Lee, SkillUp Coalition executive director

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

It's our pleasure, Steve. Thank you for being on Work in Progress.

Steve Lee, SkillUp Coalition executive director:

It is my distinct pleasure. Thank you very much, Ramona.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You've been listening to Work in Progress, a WorkingNation podcast. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, Editor-in-Chief of WorkingNation. Thanks for listening.