

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. It's my pleasure to welcome to the podcast, Amanda Cage, the president and CEO of the National Fund for Workforce Solutions. Amanda, welcome.

Amanda Cage, National Fund for Workforce Solutions CEO:

Thank you for having me.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Totally my pleasure. I've been looking forward to this conversation for quite a while. On this podcast and on the pages of workingnation.com, one of the main themes is that local collaboration is necessary to ensure good jobs in the community or a region. That's why I wanted to talk to you today. This is at the heart of your mission.

Amanda Cage, National Fund for Workforce Solutions CEO:

Yes, the National Fund is a national network of innovators and implementers in workforce development. We bring a demand-driven and evidence-based approach to the work. We contribute resources, test ideas to improve public policies and employer practices. And we do this in about 30 communities.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And how does this work? How are you working with those local communities to advance the workforce?

Amanda Cage, National Fund for Workforce Solutions CEO:

In our 30 communities, there are a variety of actors who have come together to decide to have a shared strategy around workforce development. Those communities can often be located at what we call a backbone organization. So United Ways, community foundations, workforce boards, Chamber of Commerce or economic development organizations provide that backbone. But essentially, these communities have come together and on some level have agreed to our four integrated solutions framework, where we focus on activating employers to make jobs better, equipping workers for success, changing systems and co-investment.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Let's kind of break that down a little bit. How do you work with the employers to activate them? How do you work with them to make the jobs better, a better quality of job in the community?

Amanda Cage, National Fund for Workforce Solutions CEO:

So the basis of the National Fund really was industry partnerships. All of our collaboratives have started their work around industry partnerships, where employers in a particular industry came together to work to solve some of the problems that they were collectively having, usually around talent recruitment or retention. And so, we got folks who sometimes don't work together, but here they have a collective goal. And we have built off of that base of industry partnerships.

Amanda Cage, National Fund for Workforce Solutions CEO:

And those industry partnerships happen in a variety of industries. We have industry partnerships in manufacturing, in construction, healthcare, IT, a number of industries. And when we started working with employers in those industry partnerships, we realized there are some common elements around job quality and making sure that workers had access to what we consider to be a quality job. And as part of that, we created a framework of what that quality job looks like, a definition. So we work with employers now to really think about their internal jobs, how those jobs are designed and how we can make them a quality job through a variety of elements.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Would you be able to give me an example of how that has worked in a community, a particular employer you might've worked with?

Amanda Cage, National Fund for Workforce Solutions CEO:

Yeah. So I'll give a little bit of example of what that framework looks like, and then talk a little bit about how that manifest itself with a particular employer. When we look at the framework, there are some core elements of job quality, and it's the things that we tend to think of, a living wage, health and safety, secure scheduling, all of those pieces of what makes a quality job. But we add other elements, and namely opportunity, making sure that workers have the opportunity to grow in that job, including clear career pathways. And then, also worker voice to make sure that workers can bring their full selves to work and that their needs are being met. They're able to articulate those needs to employers and those needs are being met.

Amanda Cage, National Fund for Workforce Solutions CEO:

How this plays out with particular employers, I'll give an example of work that we're doing with some nursing homes in Ohio, where nursing homes have been able to come together and talk to their employees about what some of their needs are. And there could be things like everything from secure scheduling, so really working with those employees to understand how their work schedules work or don't work with the rest of their lives and trying to make that element of their work better, but also things like recognition, clear ideas about what it takes to move from one shift to another shift or from one occupation to raise up in that career path. So working with employers to sort of understand those dynamics about their jobs.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

How is the worker being impacted by this relationship? Have you seen good progress for them? You just gave that example at the nursing home. Are you seeing progress for the worker?

Amanda Cage, National Fund for Workforce Solutions CEO:

Definitely. I think that shows up in lots of different ways. I'll give another example from a project that we worked on that also is really looking at the needs of the worker, but through their relationship with the employer. So one of the examples of benefits that we think of through a quality job is financial wellness. So we had a project where we worked with a manufacturing firm around what financial wellness looked like for their workers. So we know that the majority of workers can't absorb unexpected financial situation over \$400, for example.

Amanda Cage, National Fund for Workforce Solutions CEO:

With COVID in particular, the vulnerabilities and the fragility of the workers that worked for them became much more apparent. We worked with a manufacturing firm in Wichita who was really interested in doing financial wellness programs with their employees. And we created a financial wellness guide that anybody can use, but really that helped them as an employer work with employees to understand what some of their needs were. Everything from debt reduction, additional savings, ways to think about paying off college loans, but really serving their employees to understand where were they stuck financially and what kind of access to resources could they give their employees? And through this process, they were able to make nearly, between both reduction in debt and accumulated savings, a million dollars worth of change for those employees.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

A million dollars, that's quite a remarkable number. So that sounds like that whole idea, if it can be scaled across the country, it'll have a remarkable impact on workers everywhere.

Amanda Cage, National Fund for Workforce Solutions CEO:

Yeah. And that's just another way to think more holistically about your workers, right? You're not just giving them a paycheck. You're not just paying them by the hour, but really thinking about how do you help those workers build financial stability and build wealth while you have them at your business and are able to give them additional resources to do that.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So does the National Fund, by its name it sounds like it puts money in it's a philanthropic organization, or do you work together with these groups to find funding?

Amanda Cage, National Fund for Workforce Solutions CEO:

As I mentioned before, one of our four solutions is co-investment and that happens on two levels. We do, at the national office, solicited investors from National Funders, and we have a number of long-term National Funders who support our work and support programming that we then put out to our collaboratives for them to have access to. We require a one-to-one match for those national dollars. So we know that way, those localities are really invested in those programs. Simultaneously, all of our collaboratives on the ground are made up of folks who are either pulling or aligning their money around this shared vision for workforce development. For some of our collaboratives, they access our National Funds, but for some of our collaboratives, they work with the funding that they have on the ground.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Part of the national conversation now is skills and the importance of how skills are changing. What role do you see that in the work you're doing? Are you focusing on making sure people have these new skills, or is it more the quality of the job that we've discussed?

Amanda Cage, National Fund for Workforce Solutions CEO:

So it's both. And when we think about, again, our four solutions, our activating employers to make jobs better and our equip workers for success solutions are very tied together. The way that we think about this is sort of how you think about traditional workforce development in terms of skills training, right? On the job training, incumbent worker training, apprenticeships. That is some of the base of workforce development work, and we believe that there's an upskilling that needs to be done to respond to the

changes that are happening in the economy. But we really take that to another level, which is to say, in order for folks to be successful in those programs, we need to make some significant changes. And those changes in our view really are around worker supports. So how do we make sure that workers have all the supports that they need to be successful in those programs? But also worker engagement, including worker voice.

Amanda Cage, National Fund for Workforce Solutions CEO:

Some of making workers successful is about changing those workplaces, especially as we think about racial equity and trying to make sure that we are making opportunities for especially high growth, high demand jobs available to everybody, looking very particularly at workers of color, how do we help employers who are looking to get workers through those training programs, equipped to absorb those workers when they come into those businesses and into those employers? The fact that we have programs where we need to do recruitment to diversify, to be paying attention to racial equity means that there's something there on the other side as well to be thinking about in terms of why particular occupations or industries have lower representation from different communities.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

How do you build your network? How are you finding these organizations, these groups, these collaboratives that need your help, or maybe are already on their pathway?

Amanda Cage, National Fund for Workforce Solutions CEO:

We are in a very privileged position in that we're a network that other people want to join. We have a number of collaboratives that have been with us since the beginning. We've grown over time as more local communities have seen the work that we're doing and have wanted to join our national network. I'll say it really starts on the ground. So when somebody is interested in becoming part of the National Fund network, there's a fair amount of work that needs to happen in the community where they reside around bringing people together and seeing if there really is a shared interest and a shared vision and a shared strategy for workforce development in that area, and bringing together people who are willing to bring their time, talent and resources to the table outside of their individual work. Right? So that work has to happen on the ground.

Amanda Cage, National Fund for Workforce Solutions CEO:

At some point, we get folks who interested in coming to us. We will sort of assess where they are and whether that work that's percolating locally is moving in the right direction. We will often allow people, provide some technical assistance or some coaching to help folks get a strong collaborative up and running. And then, once people become part of the network, and I think this is critical, in addition to some of the resources that come down through our national initiatives, it really is the peer learning network that we've created. We have lots of ways that we collect information about best practices and disseminate that information, venues for people to come together, to share their challenges and learn from each other, various communities of practice, a biannual convening, where we bring workforce development practitioners from across the country together. So there's really rich resources that people get out of becoming one of the members of our network.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

What do you think the biggest challenge the nation's workforce is facing right now?

Amanda Cage, National Fund for Workforce Solutions CEO:

I would say there's two issues, and this runs through all of the work that we do at the National Fund. Quality jobs. And we've been working on this issue of quality jobs for a long time, but we have built our economy on a foundation of bad jobs. And so, we have so many workers who are working, who are not making ends meet. They work in jobs that are not stable, that don't provide the financial resources that you need to have security. So really working to increase the availability of good jobs to people and working with employers to make those good jobs available.

Amanda Cage, National Fund for Workforce Solutions CEO:

I would say the other issue everybody is thinking about these days, but we think about this in a really deep way, is racial equity. One of the great lessons learned from the COVID crisis and, of course, all of these dynamics were present before COVID hit, is our labor market really is segregated racially in ways that put workers of color, crowds them in those low quality jobs. And how do we think about making sure that the opportunity for workers of color and communities of color are more equitably distributed? And that's something that across our network is really a focus of the work that we've been doing.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

In this pandemic and the fallout in the workforce, we've seen a lot of older workers losing jobs and trying to figure out where do they go next. Have you seen any programs that are helping them?

Amanda Cage, National Fund for Workforce Solutions CEO:

It'll be interesting to see what emerges. We're trying to learn a lot of lessons from our last recession. And those of us who have been in the workforce development space for a long time know that the 2008 recession especially did a lot of damage in terms of long-term unemployment and long-term unemployment for older workers. And we saw that dynamic really play out. At the time, I was doing work with a workforce board here in Chicago, where I live, and we created specific programs with AARP around focusing on workers who were over 50 and helping them make career changes, really transferring their skills, often skills that they had had over decades in their jobs that they lost through no fault of their own, and making that connection to other work.

Amanda Cage, National Fund for Workforce Solutions CEO:

Sometimes it's about skills, but the means by which you apply for jobs and have access to jobs is really different. So if you've been working for 20, 30 years and all of a sudden find yourself unemployed, it's not just about trying to figure out what the next job is or how you get the right skillset, but it actually is about the process of finding a job and how that has changed over time.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So you mentioned that you've spent a couple of decades here in Chicago working. You had worked with the Chicago Workforce Board there. How do you think your experiences on the issue of economic inequality are coming to bear in the National Fund right now?

Amanda Cage, National Fund for Workforce Solutions CEO:

Prior to my work with the Workforce Board, I worked with philanthropy around these issues around workforce development and started my work as a union organizer, working with low wage workers. So my personal and professional experiences that I come to this from a variety of angles, working on this

issue of how do we change the trajectory, especially for low wage, frontline workers of color. And I think that we are in a moment in time and that all of this is coming to a head. All of the issues that have been revealed, especially with some intensity over the last year, around health and safety issues, as it relates to COVID, essential workers and who does those jobs and who has been made more vulnerable in terms of health and safety, looking at the racial disparities in terms of income and job opportunities, all of that has come to a head truly in the last year.

Amanda Cage, National Fund for Workforce Solutions CEO:

And I think we have an opportunity in this moment to think about how all of those issues intersect and really need to take advantage of this moment to rectify past wrongs as we think about programs and policies that will get us out of the current recession that we're in. We need to make sure that we don't repeat the mistakes that we made last time. Right? We came out of the 2008 recession with actually making some of these dynamics, definitely not providing solutions and often, in many cases, making some of these dynamics worse. And so if we don't take the time this time around to address those issues explicitly with targeted programs and targeted policies and bringing a broader group of people along to make progress in these issues, we're really going to lose out on an opportunity to fundamentally change things for the next couple of decades.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Amanda, thank you for taking the time to talk to us on Work in Progress.

Amanda Cage, National Fund for Workforce Solutions CEO:

Thank you for having me.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

That was Amanda Cage, the president and CEO of the National Fund for Workforce Solutions. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of WorkingNation. Thank you for listening.