

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:

For more than 30 years, Network For Teaching Entrepreneurship also known as NFTE, has been sharing the power of entrepreneurship to youth and low-income communities, and in the midst of the unemployment crisis brought on by COVID-19, that program expanded to help adults. Joining me today on the podcast is NFTE President and CEO, J.D. LaRock. J.D, good to talk to you again.

J.D. LaRock, Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship:

Hey Ramona. Great to be with you and your WorkingNation audience.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

We've been following NFTE for a while, and then last year, we wrote about it because of this expanded adult program, and I think as we're coming out of COVID-19 and people are starting to get back into the workforce, I'd like to start there. I'd like to talk about what kind of training you started offering last summer to adults who are in the middle of this crisis.

J.D. LaRock, Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship:

As you said, for more than 30 years, NFTE has offered entrepreneurship education to high schoolers and middle schoolers in 25 states, and 13 countries now around the world. But in the midst of the unemployment crisis brought on by the pandemic, we realized that there was a real opportunity to take the curriculum that we've used so well with younger learners, and adapt it for older people who had lost their jobs due to the pandemic. Millions of people were unceremoniously booted from their jobs when whole sectors of our economy shut down, and it occurred to us that many of them needed to find another job, might not be able to find another job because sectors of the economy had shut down, but they needed to provide for themselves and their families, and they might like to do so by starting their own business.

J.D. LaRock, Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship:

So we offered something called NFTE Career Relaunch. It's available still at our website, www.nfte.com. It's a free online program that walks adult learners through all of the steps to create a basic business plan, and even provide some resources on how they might go find financial resources to start up their business. Since its inception last year, more than 15,000 people in the US and around the world have taken advantage of this program. We've taught versions of it through the ASU GSV bootcamp that GSV has offered at a couple points this past year, and we're very pleased to have been able to offer this as a resource and service to young adult and adult learners, in addition to our traditional program.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So this is free to all the people who sign up for it?

J.D. LaRock, Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship:

It is. All you have to do is go to our website, again, www.nfte.com. You can look for the Career Relaunch icon, it's a very simple email sign up, and you'll get immediate access to a very robust online course, if I may say so, with digital interactive modules, and videos, and online assessments that walks learners through all it takes to identify a business idea, develop that business idea, find your customer segment, assess your competitors, and then find resources to help engage in startup, which is exactly the sort of thing we do with young learners around the country.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So what would the next step be for someone after they go through the program?

J.D. LaRock, Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship:

In some ways, the next step is simply to go launch your business, because the output of the Career Relaunch Program is that learners should be able to have a completed basic business plan by the end of this 10 to 14 lesson sequence. However, I will say the following: on the heels of the success of NFTE Career Relaunch, we at NFTE have decided to take a further step as an organization, and actually launch a new formal division of our organization that will move us beyond our traditional work with youth, and begin to work with community colleges, and four-year colleges, and workforce development agencies, so that we can actually bring this formal programming into settings where job seekers, and young adult and adult learners are looking for more entrepreneurship resources, where we're super excited to be able to expand our organization in this way. In some ways, it's a silver lining to an otherwise devastating year brought on by COVID-19, because it helped us realize as an organization that there was immense potential to provide even more social purpose to the country and the world, by doing what we do and applying it to an adult population.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So you say you're just about to launch this. Do you have a target date, and have you already signed up some community colleges?

J.D. LaRock, Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship:

We are in conversations with community college districts in California, and in Massachusetts, and in Florida. We have a four-year college partnership with St. Petersburg College in Florida, where they've utilized some of the federal stimulus funding that was authorized this past year, to actually put in place a formally taught version of NFTE Career Relaunch. That's been going really well, and it gave us further confidence in the idea that we might be able to replicate this, this coming year. But the formal division at NFTE, we'll be launching in FY21, so as of July 2021, right around the corner. And if there are any workforce development folks, or community college folks, or college folks listening out there, I encourage you to get in touch with us, because we have something really special we've seen at work with learners just like those that you serve, and to the extent that you might want to give your learners even more access to the tools that it takes to become an entrepreneur, a small business owner, we'd love to work with you to help do that.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I think that's great that you've had 15,000 people go through the program in just a short period of time. I can't even imagine, but maybe you can tell me how many young adults, middle schoolers, high schoolers have gone through the youth program?

J.D. LaRock, Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship:

In NFTE's 34 year existence, we've had well over a million young learners go through our program. This year, this past year, we will have served 34,000 students across the US in 25 states, and then an additional 15,000 students or so in the 13 countries that we work in, in North America, in Europe, and Asia.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So this past year, I would imagine you had to go online to help those students. Prior to that, did you do this in school settings or club settings? How were you doing that?

J.D. LaRock, Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship:

Typically, NFTE programs are delivered as a formal course taught by a public school teacher, typically. And in high schools, it might be the business elective or the economics elective. The NFTE class fills that slot in the program. In middle schools, it might be some kind of non-core elective that is taught by the main classroom teacher. However, one thing that was really felicitous for us as an organization is that prior to the pandemic, we had already built the infrastructure to deliver our programs, both through classrooms and online. And so, when everybody switched to remote learning, we were fortunate to be ready, in that we had all of our materials already up on a platform that our teachers already had access to, and that helped smooth the way. It's one of the reasons why, in this very tough year of COVID-19, we were not only able to sustain the number of learners that we work with in the United States, we were actually able to grow it a little bit.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I think when you're a high schooler, probably senior, junior, you might be thinking about what's your next step? Do you get a lot of buy-in from middle schoolers? Because that's young. I went to Junior Achievement when I was in middle school, but I hadn't really thought of starting my own business.

J.D. LaRock, Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship:

Junior Achievement's a great program, and we consider Junior Achievement a close friend and sister to what NFTE does. What Junior Achievement does in out-of-school time settings, NFTE does embedded within the typical school day. I've spent a lot of time with our students over the past year and a half that I've been CEO of NFTE, Ramona. As a matter of fact, we are running our regional competition sequence right now, as we're recording this, and in our L.A. region, we actually had a number of fantastic middle school competitors from Hawthorne Middle School, one of the fantastic middle schools we work with there in the L.A. Unified School District. And I'll tell you, they're as excited about what NFTE brings to their classrooms as our older learners. What our younger and older learners have in common is a real desire to do things that are authentic to themselves and their interests, and a real desire to address problems and challenges that they see in their lives and their communities, and I'll give you a great example.

J.D. LaRock, Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship:

So one of the really fantastic business pitches that we heard just last week, was from a young woman who really got to thinking about the problem of vaccinations, and the fact that young people have to receive a number of vaccinations. They typically are receiving them sequentially, not all at once, and of course, the whole issue of vaccinations is on everybody's mind. So she actually invented a prototype

that would deliver multiple vaccinations safely at one time, instead of sequentially. She happens to be in a family where she has a mother and father who work in the medical profession, so it's very authentic interest for her, and she came up with this idea, by the by. I mean, the judges really grilled her, "Does this meet regulatory requirements?" and all this sort of thing. She knew all the answers to these questions, and she came up with a solution to a practical problem that she saw.

J.D. LaRock, Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship:

I'll give you another example. Another young woman, a middle school student got to thinking about her love of music, and she got to thinking about deaf and hard of hearing individuals, and wanting to create a solution so that deaf and hard of hearing individuals can experience the joy of music in the way that she does, as a hearing person. And so, she invented a prototype for a cost-effective, basically tech-infused shirt, where deaf and hard of hearing individuals can feel the vibrations from music. Now, there are such products on the market already, but the problem is, they're super expensive, they're extremely unaffordable. And she investigated technology solutions and manufacturing solutions that would bring a similar product to market, that would get the job done and provide the same sort of benefit. And in her pitch, she spoke about how much music means to her, and why this was such a motivator for wanting to come up with her own business and provide the solution.

J.D. LaRock, Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship:

Again, Ramona, these are middle school students coming up with these fantastic ideas. So our learners never cease to amaze me with the seriousness and the sophistication of the ideas and solutions they bring to the table, even when they're in the seventh and eighth grades.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

NFTE is preparing these young people for perhaps, a career as an entrepreneur, startup business, but I imagine you're giving them the tools to be grilled, as you put it, for this competition, what do they have to go through, and what do they have to prove to you to win that competition?

J.D. LaRock, Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship:

Well, first of all, one of the very special things about our model is that it's not just about having students work on their own, and then get grilled by competition judges. It's a very supported model where we bring in corporate and community volunteers, and mentors to work with our students over the course of a year's time on presentation skills, on communication skills, on answering questions on the fly. And so, after a year of working with their classroom teacher and these volunteer mentors on all of this, then they go into a competition sequence, much like Shark Tank, to tell you the truth, where it starts out at the school level and then advances to the district level, and then what we're doing now is I'm having our regionals, where students from different schools within one of NFTE's 11 regions will compete against each other.

J.D. LaRock, Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship:

We like to talk about the fact that we're developing the different domains of the entrepreneurial mindset. So these are communication, collaboration, problem solving, but when it comes to entrepreneurship, it's also skills like future orientation, the ability to manage risk, the ability to find solutions where challenges exist. These are special domains of thinking, and academics, and skill that are different from typical classroom learning, and I think that's one of the reasons why our NFTE learners are so invested in the courses that we offer through their public schools. It's such a different type of

education from what they often get, and they find it interesting and authentic to themselves, and really fun too.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So this year's competition, the grand prize winner will be in October. And recently, I read a little bit about Jose Rodriguez, who is the 2020 competition winner from Rhode Island, and what struck me about his story, and I'd love for you to share it, is that it came out of something very personal to him, trying to help his younger brother who had autism. So I'd love for you to share that story. It's really lovely.

J.D. LaRock, Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship:

Sure. Thank you for that. Jose, as you said, was the top winner of our 2020 national competition. So of the 30,000 plus students we served last year, he was tops among them all. His business, which he launched, it's an active business actually making sales right now, is called Tassium, T-A-S-I-U-M, and it's a play on the word "autism." What his business is, is selling fidget toy-infused apparel to help people with autism and ADHD, never be far from devices like fidget spinners, or other types of things that they use to help manage some of the impacts of their autism and ADHD.

J.D. LaRock, Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship:

As you said, the reason that Jose was so interested in building a business around this, is that he has a brother who has autism. He realized that there was not only a solution that he could provide for his brother, but a solution that could help many, many millions of people in the United States and around the world. And so, he developed a prototype, first, just a t-shirt. Frankly, a very simple design. He put a grommet in a t-shirt, so that you could clip a fidget spinner or other type of toy to it, and then started expanding the product line from there.

J.D. LaRock, Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship:

One of the things that was so effecting and effective about his business pitch, was that he talked openly and deeply about his brother's struggles with autism, how much he, as his older brother, loves his brother, and wanted to provide a solution for him and people like him, and the pride that he feels in having been able to do so. And having won the national competition, NFTE provided Jose with seed money to continue to expand his business. He now has launched his website, tassiumworldwide.com, and as I said, they're actually selling real apparel along these lines. Jose has gotten a lot of attention, all well-deserved, because it's a fantastic idea that's filling a real need.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

He may be getting a lot of attention, but I think there's the benefit for all these students that you're talking about is something incredible, not only the young people, but the older adults who are relaunching their careers and maybe want to try entrepreneurship. There's the soft skills that you learn from dealing with customers, and dealing with partners and suppliers. When you're targeting these students and young adults, is it all low-income communities, or are you expanded through other communities as well?

J.D. LaRock, Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship:

NFTE's historic mission has been to bring the tools of inclusive capitalism, as we like to call it, to communities that have been left out. Over our 34 year existence, we have focused the vast majority of our efforts on communities that experience need. Because disadvantaged and underestimated communities lack resources, they are typically among the most entrepreneurial, because they have to craft the solutions themselves without help from others. And the very definition of entrepreneurship is being able to make something, irrespective of available resources. That is in fact, the definition of entrepreneurship. Our work in our traditional communities is very apropos to the mindset that we find in many of our learners.

J.D. LaRock, Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship:

With that said, I am also pleased to let you and your listeners know that NFTE, as we expand, is also making an effort to expand the power of entrepreneurship education to communities in general. We, as part of our organizational evolution, will be selling our curriculum to all sorts of public school and non-public school communities, with the idea that the proceeds from this will be reinvested into the mission. NFTE, as I said, works in low-income communities in 25 states across the US, but the demand for what we have is so much more. And so, we are actually being a bit assertive and aggressive now as an organization, and selling our product to those who would like to pay for it, so that we can go into even more communities of need, and bring what we do to even more learners.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

It sounds like you have a lot coming up, the end of your competition, the expansion into community colleges, and the expansions into a lot of other communities as well. I'm so glad we could share that with the audience today.

J.D. LaRock, Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship:

No, it's my pleasure. And I guess we wouldn't be a good entrepreneurship education organization if we weren't a little entrepreneurial ourselves, so that's what we're trying to do. Ramona, always good to be with you, and thanks so much for the invitation. It's a delight to be able to share some of the stories of our learners, and some of our work at NFTE with your audience. Thank you.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And J.D., thank you. I always love hearing what you guys are up to, and what you in particular up to. It's always a pleasure to hear that, and it's always good news. So thank you very much. My guest today, J.D. LaRock, President and CEO of NFTE. J.D., thank you.

J.D. LaRock, Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship:

You're welcome.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

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