

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:

Our focus today is the state of work in the state of Hawaii. It's my pleasure to welcome Governor David Ige to the Work in Progress Podcast. Governor, thank you so much for joining us.

Governor David Ige, Hawaii:

Aloha, and thank you for having me.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You know, I'd love to get a little picture where the state has been in the last year, what happened during COVID, and where we are now. And then we'll go from there about efforts to connect out of work Hawaiians with jobs.

Governor David Ige, Hawaii:

Absolutely, Ramona. I appreciate this opportunity. At the end of 2019, we were having our seventh record year of visit arrivals here in the state. Our economy was doing very well. Our unemployment rate was amongst the lowest in the country. We were at about 2.4% unemployed, which as you know is virtually full employment. We were looking forward to great things after coming through the Great Recession, and really we felt that things were hitting our stride. We were able to get Southwest Airlines to begin service to the state, which was a 10 year project to expand seat capacity to the islands, and things were looking up.

Governor David Ige, Hawaii:

Then the pandemic hit, and clearly the most difficult decision I had to make was the decision to order a mandatory quarantine for all incoming travelers to the state. And essentially, we went from the lowest unemployment rate in the country, 2.4%, to the highest unemployment rate in the country, exceeding 22%, in a matter of four to six weeks. We were closing hotels and closing businesses through that first six weeks in the pandemic. We were asking visitors not to come to the islands, to postpone trips and vacations, because we wanted to ensure that we could keep our community healthy and safe. Certainly that was a very difficult time, I guess 18 months ago right now.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So that shows how dependent on tourism, obviously, a beautiful, beautiful state, a beautiful place to visit, but that it's not a diverse workforce in the terms of type of industry and jobs. Now that you're coming back, I know you're 8.1% unemployment, so you've cut it in half. So are those jobs all back into the tourism industry right now?

Governor David Ige, Hawaii:

Not all of them. And we clearly wanted to look for opportunities for upskilling and retraining. We worked with our community colleges and our universities and private sector providers to really make training available to those who may have been impacted by the visitor industry, but would be open and

interested in pursuing new careers. And that was a big part of our efforts, was really to give this opportunity.

Governor David Ige, Hawaii:

Obviously, a lot of people became unemployed. They work very hard in the hospitality industry, but for those who were interested, we wanted to connect them with appropriate training if they needed additional training, and then really give them the opportunity to support expansion of our economy. At the same time that many businesses were shut down and laying people off, there were businesses that were thriving and booming and unable to hire the people that they need to be successful.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

What kind of businesses are you talking about and what kind of training are people getting?

Governor David Ige, Hawaii:

Ramona, it was a couple things that this pandemic truly accelerated, the whole transformation to a digital economy and digital businesses, the infusion of technology in traditional, as well as virtually every single business and organization in the community, had to occur in order for any of those organizations to survive. I've been a big proponent of using technology for efficiency in government, but it takes a long time to implement that change. Suddenly, every organization were doing virtual meetings, the whole notion of online ordering, online delivery, transformation of our restaurants to be takeout only initially, putting on and expanding online presence, being able to replace the bricks and mortar opportunity with takeout and others, virtually every organization in our community was faced with that task.

Governor David Ige, Hawaii:

So a lot of what we were doing is doing the job training for the unemployed and then really helping our businesses through this transition, a public, private partnership, trying to let those businesses that are technology-infused really assist others in getting up to speed and moving to cloud-based and connecting them with digital platforms that would allow them to accelerate that digital ready kind of economy, that all of them were forced to do that or they wouldn't survive.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

How would you describe the digital gap in Hawaii now? Is there an issue with broadband or an issue with people not having access to the training to make them ready for this digital world that we live in?

Governor David Ige, Hawaii:

You know, one of the lessons that we did learn in the pandemic is that there is a gap. It's a couple things. One, we suddenly became aware that everything went digital, from online learning, to telehealth, to virtually every business and organization embracing telework, online ordering, every facet of technology infusion into their businesses occurred. We knew that there were gaps.

Governor David Ige, Hawaii:

It clearly exposed some of our public housing units didn't have internet access, so the students were unable to participate in online learning. We distributed hotspots, tried to accelerate internet connectivity into all of those communities, because we knew that if you didn't have internet access, you wouldn't be able to access a wide range of benefits that we were providing.

Governor David Ige, Hawaii:

As you know, we did struggle with the transition in state government. We wanted to avoid face-to-face in-person delivery of services, and so in many of our safety net programs, from SNAP, to Medicaid, health insurance, to public school learning, everything went to online. And those in our community who did not have access were completely left out.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Before we move on to some of the programs now, have you been able to resolve some of those connectivity issues, and I mean, person to person, person to state?

Governor David Ige, Hawaii:

We did make significant progress. We worked with our private sector partners to establish free hotspots throughout the communities. We did focus on those communities that were most restricted and didn't have internet access. We looked at how we could leverage state resources and state investments.

Governor David Ige, Hawaii:

We initiated a highways project where we were looking at the highway rights of way and working with private sector partners to stand up as quickly as we could pilot sites and pilot communities, where we could provide free wifi access to as many of those in the community who did not have access in a way that would enable them. We did, through our public schools, provide digital devices and digital hotspots for those who did not have or were not able to afford, and we continued to look at those communities that did not have internet access, and work with private sector partners to connect them.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You know, Governor, your state is one of 10 states that are part of this Workforce Innovation Network with the National Governors Association, Cognizant US Foundation, now Cognizant Foundation, and you were one of the 10 states to receive some inaugural grants. How are you allocating that money? What are you doing to help get it a long-term economic impact?

Governor David Ige, Hawaii:

Yeah, so just a couple of programs that we had launched, just that we thought to some extent were obvious gaps, and we felt low hanging fruit from the perspective of being able to get and make significant impact in very short period of time. We launched a program called Remote Ready Hawaii. As you know, Ramona, virtually every organization transitioned to telework in some way, shape, or form. And we were working with those who were unemployed here and working with them to identify telework opportunities for Amazon or Google or a wide range of companies that were looking for telework. And then really focused on intensive training for these individuals, looking at the digital skills gap, connecting them with online instruction and programs that would allow them to qualify for these telework opportunities and get them back employed.

Governor David Ige, Hawaii:

And in most instances, these individuals were in the hospitality industry, but they wanted to and welcomed the opportunity to change jobs. And so it was a real intensive effort, working with those who became unemployed, getting them the skills and training that they needed. And several of them ended up being able to get those teleworking jobs, staying here in the islands and working for businesses

across the country as telework individuals. So that was really something that we felt was very successful in building that program, because obviously we had to build that from scratch.

Governor David Ige, Hawaii:

We really worked to build the mindset within state government to be creative and innovative, to not stop with what we normally would do in the context of state government. But this whole notion of be ready for anything, as we explored and identified resources in our community, and as we identified the gaps between the skills that unemployed workers had and what they needed, the model was really be ready for anything. We have to as an organization be willing to embrace different kinds of resources and different kinds of vendors in order to get the training that our people needed to get them employed. That was one of the big lessons that we learned, the standard program of working with the university to come up with training programs would not happen fast enough to make a difference in these individuals' lives.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I was reading a little bit about the Hawaii Executive Collaborative's Talent Roadmap to Recovery, a long name, right? And it identified over 270 living wage jobs, and also credentials and certificates which are very important to a lot of industries to signify, signal, someone has those skills that they need. And it looked like that the training opportunities working with the community colleges are in a lot of different fields. So they're in IT, maintenance, nursing. What can you tell me about how Hawaiians could access those training programs?

Governor David Ige, Hawaii:

One of the things that the Hawaii Executive Collaborative did help us is really gather the data and help us to be really focused. As governor, it is frustrating for me to have good paying jobs, high quality, desirable jobs, and not have qualified residents to really fill them. And so we have been working with the university, and once again, it's that whole notion of be ready for anything, trying to encourage and support with funding and other kinds of resources that would allow the university to be more nimble, to look at some of these certificate programs.

Governor David Ige, Hawaii:

And it might be cybersecurity or website sourcing, just a wide range of digital skills. Use the university and community college system to put the kind of intense training programs so that it's not a two year degree or a four year degree, it's a six week intensive program that can give the individuals the digital skills that they need, and then support them in expanding and gathering more of those certifications and more difficult skills that they can attain to really get promoted in whatever digital career that they find.

Governor David Ige, Hawaii:

So that really has been helpful. We've been working with not only the public university and community colleges here, but a wide range of training programs. As you know, because everyone went to online learning during the pandemic, there are a lot more opportunities, and everyone learned that online learning can be helpful, especially for working adults or unemployed adults who really are looking for changing career, and they need to be able to acquire the skills as rapidly as possible so they can get back to work.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

WorkingNation is very interested in the job potential in the green economy. Where are you putting your efforts in that? What kind of jobs are you looking at? How are you trying to build that in Hawaii?

Governor David Ige, Hawaii:

We're working on that in a couple of different ways. One of the reasons we are committed to 100% transformation of our electricity to clean, renewable energy is because we're tired of having to import goods, products, services from out of state to be able to operate our economy here. In terms of energy, Hawaii used to be the most dependent on imported fossil fuel in the country. 95, 96% of our energy came from imported fossil fuels. Our 2020 goal was to get to 30% of that being renewable.

Governor David Ige, Hawaii:

So we've come a long way in a relatively short period of time, and that really has created a lot of green jobs, a lot of jobs in the solar PV industry, in construction of these projects, a lot of jobs in ... As we create the opportunities for green energy companies here in the islands, we stop sending money out of state to import oil and create jobs to run the solar farms, these biofuel electricity generators, and others. During this pandemic, as our hospitality industry collapsed, we saw our green energy, the solar projects continued to move forward. We had a significant number of projects to continue to be installed and employ people. And we do anticipate that as we accelerate the green energy jobs, that we would see more and more of our workforce supporting green energy.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I think one of the things that you said that people don't realize is that there are a lot of jobs that the green economy creates. The maintenance, the construction, plumbing, electrical work, all of that play a part in creating a green economy.

Governor David Ige, Hawaii:

Absolutely. And you know, Ramona, we're doing things here in Hawaii that is not happening anywhere else in the country. We have the highest penetration of rooftop solar in the country here in the islands. We're way above 30%. Every rooftop being a power generator on our grid creates really special challenges for our utilities, and it also creates research jobs, consulting jobs to really understand what we want is clean, renewable energy that is just as safe and reliable as the fossil fuel infrastructure. There's companies here doing research in battery technology. We are learning a lot about what happens when you are totally distributed energy systems.

Governor David Ige, Hawaii:

The county of Kauai, for example, during the peak sunshine time, during the middle of the day, will get to 95, 98% of their energy being supplied by renewable sources. And so the challenge of how to manage that, how to be able to have battery storage available, how to be able to have some fossil fuel generation so that we can be reliable, and integrate all of those facets to make sure that people can get electricity when they turn on the light, is complex. And there's no other utility grid like we're having to create here in the islands, and that does create a lot of other kinds of professional jobs for consultants here locally, as well as allows us to export that knowledge that we gain to solve the same problems that every community is facing as the planet really moves toward green jobs and green energy.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

In the last few minutes we have here, I want to ask two questions. The first one is, what do you see is the biggest challenge you have getting people with the skills they need and getting them back into the workforce?

Governor David Ige, Hawaii:

I do think that the biggest challenge is that giving the unemployed the confidence that they can learn new skills, and everybody is always a little, they don't believe they have the ability to learn new skills, especially when many have been working in the same industry for a long time. They feel overwhelmed by the technology, and like that it's something that they can't learn. And we do see that in many instances, and a lot of it has to do with we have much better online learning products, and the community colleges and the universities and the private educational institutions are really finding that optimum blend of online learning and in-person kind of interactions. And just being able to get even one-on-one kind of learning through the digital platforms to accelerate people acquiring the skills in much shorter time.

Governor David Ige, Hawaii:

So it's really instilling in people the belief that they have the capability to acquire the skills and that they can be successful in these new digital jobs, if they are willing to learn, willing to put in the time. And we do believe that it provides much more hope for the future, because it gets back to, you know, ready for anything. For many years, we've talked in education about lifelong learning, about the pace of change in our communities, and the pace of change in knowledge is just happening so much quicker now that your cell phone is obsolete in six months, and it's new features and new opportunities that happen.

Governor David Ige, Hawaii:

And so we're seeing a couple of things. Technology is becoming pervasive in virtually every single industry. Every single job is touched and changed by technology in some way, and we need to give those who are unemployed the confidence to know that they do have the ability to learn new skills and that we are committed to helping them if they are motivated to do it.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So my last thought slash kind of question is listening to you talk, this ready for anything, it feels like that's the spirit that you have there in Hawaii, and that getting everyone on board with this is a very positive message and could have a very positive outcome.

Governor David Ige, Hawaii:

Yes, absolutely. You know, trying to change the mindset, make people believe in themselves, and really, Ramona, what makes Hawaii a very special place is our Aloha spirit and our willingness to understand that we are a community and that we're stronger together than apart, and that everyone is willing to help each other. We want businesses who have mastered and embraced technology to help businesses that are still struggling, because sometimes a business to business conversation is so much easier to have than a business to government or a business to educator kind of conversation.

Governor David Ige, Hawaii:

And so we are asking the entire community, it's an all hands on deck kind of initiative to all do what we can to help every organization and every business pivot to digital, to be able to help each other acquire

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the skills that they might be lacking, helping our friends and neighbors get access to digital skills so that they can more fully participate in the digital economy. And we all know that we can do great things if we work together to achieve these goals.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Governor David Ige, thank you so much for joining us on the Work in Progress Podcast. It was really great to hear what you had to say.

Governor David Ige, Hawaii:

Thank you very much. Aloha.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Aloha to you. That was Governor David Ige, the governor of the state of Hawaii. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of WorkingNation. Thank you very much for listening.