

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. Today is Global Skills Day 2021, a worldwide virtual gathering to collaborate on strategies for learning 21st century skills, as we envision a post-pandemic world. I am very pleased to welcome to the podcast, Jamie Merisotis, president and CEO of Lumina Foundation and the closing keynote speaker and Jane Oates precedent of Global Skills Day. Jamie, Jane, thanks for joining me today.

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

Thanks, Ramona.

Jamie Merisotis, Lumina Foundation president & CEO:

I'm delighted to be with you.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

It's always a pleasure to talk to both of you and Jane, I talk to you a lot more than Jamie, but Jamie and I have done this podcast, I think this is the third time now. So it's always great to have you. I want to, let's start out and talk a little bit about what Global Skills Day is all about. Jamie, you're going to do the keynote, closing keynote. Tell us a little bit about what you hope to accomplish during this day long event.

Jamie Merisotis, Lumina Foundation president & CEO:

This is a massive global event. There's more than a hundred speakers. It covers participants from more than 25 countries. And the basic idea behind the organizers who put this together is to focus on this idea that learning and work have to be talked about as seamless parts of one whole. In other words, that the intersection of learning and work is not something that you should be talking about in distinct sections. They have to come together. This is an issue that obviously has been accented because of COVID, because of the conversations that we're having about the future of work and the future of learning. And this event is designed to do that. So we're going to be covering everything from those topics on work and learning to things like how to deal with HR, entrepreneurship, a variety of things. But the idea is to really bring these conversations about learning and work together at this inflection point for society.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Jane, I know that you have very strong feelings about this as well. And you've talked about this a lot for WorkingNation. Tell me where you think we're at with this right now, this intersection, are we doing a good job?

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

The direct answer is no, but I think with leaders like Jamie, leaders of his quality bringing this up, we get it to come together conceptually, and then we get the energy and enthusiasm to put them together operationally. So I am really a big fan of the ideas behind Global Skills Day. And so thrill Jamie, that you're putting your muscle behind it because you really do personify the connection between education, particularly higher education and work with your career.

Jamie Merisotis, Lumina Foundation president & CEO:

Yeah. I mean, I appreciate that. And I think the head... Of course, Jane, you've been a leader in higher education and work, for goodness sake, you've held government positions on both sides of that false divide. And so we know that these things need to come together. My view though, is that the pandemic may actually be an opportunity. An opportunity to sort of reset the conversation and particularly to talk about how the pandemic has accelerated some of the trends around how technology is changing both work and learning, about how, in fact, we need to focus more on equity when it comes to these issues of bringing work and learning together. And I think more broadly, I think we're probably past due on the conversation about understanding that learning and work are not distinct areas of life. The old saw, first you learn, then you work. We now know that these things really do come together. So it's a great opportunity, I think, to bring this global conversation together across time zones, cultures, different work experiences, and economies across the world into one cohesive conversation.

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

Yeah, and I think you hit on it so eloquently. I mean, there is a gigantic need for talent in our economy right now. On any given day, 9 million and change open jobs. There's a terrific concentration now, a drum beat on equity. And I also think it's a business reality right now, that sense of urgency business has that feeling. It's not just people in the communities of color, it's not just women, it's not just people looking for social justice. People are saying, "We cannot find the talent that we need," and they're reframing the conversation around skills. So I love it. I'm glad we lived to see this.

Jamie Merisotis, Lumina Foundation president & CEO:

And where you and I have parked ourselves for much of our careers, Jane, which is public policy, it's an interesting point in time, right? You can see tremendous interest here in the U.S., in states, in the way that states are trying to bring these conversations together into more cohesive ways. And then we have this moment and I say this not in a political sense, but in a sense of reality of President Biden and the Biden administration having this sort of once in a generation, I call it the 100 year flood opportunity to be bringing resources to both address what we will be doing post-vaccine, post-pandemic, and also prepare the nation for the longterm, for the future. And I think public policy has a significant role to play in this, but we shouldn't assume that public policy is going to solve these problems.

Jamie Merisotis, Lumina Foundation president & CEO:

Public policy in fact, could be an impediment if we use the resources that I think that are coming to prop up existing systems that have largely failed people. What we've got to do is use public policy to leverage the change. It gets back to the point that we were making earlier around equity, around bringing work and learning together, about making sure that everyone has an opportunity to develop their talents and skills over the course of a lifetime.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Yeah. Let's unpack some of this, because I think a theme that comes through and that was really laid bare by the pandemic was this issue of inequity. There's inequity for low income people because they can't afford education, sometimes they can't afford the skilling up. And there's a lot of groups that have come together and developed initiatives to help that. Let's start there. I mean, what is the biggest challenge there? I mean, money of course, but in these underrepresented communities, what's the biggest challenge?

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

Jamie, we can wrestle on this one. I think obviously money is an issue and the flexibility of that money to pay for cost of attendance, not just tuition and fees. But I think the bigger hurdle is making sure they get good college and career counseling. How many kids have we all talked to Jamie, who say they went to a four-year school and majored in, fill in the blank, anthropology and had no work experiences except the stuff that the colleges are so good at, work study, working on campus? So they have learned nothing about working in the real world off that campus. It makes me crazy.

Jamie Merisotis, Lumina Foundation president & CEO:

This inside baseball term that we use a lot now, pathways of learning, I think it's really important here, which is getting people onto the right pathways and then giving them opportunities to continue to proceed along those pathways over an extended period of time, I think is really important. And we do steer people down dead ends and cul-de-sacs instead of putting them on these long-term pathways that I think will make them successful. And for some people it means starting in a two year institution or a training program or something like that, and then continuing along a pathway. But the key is to see this as a journey that you are on as the learner worker in ways that are different than, we'll just go and get your ticket punched and then go out into the world.

Jamie Merisotis, Lumina Foundation president & CEO:

It's part of the problem by the way, with the public policy debate, which is that we are arguing about a reality, I think, that is largely in the rear view mirror, which is that it's a bunch of people, Jane, in Maya's age talking about higher ed as if the system is the way it is now when it was when we went to college. And the reality is it's a much different system. It serves a lot of adults and needs to serve a lot of adults, both in community colleges and four year institutions. It does an important job in helping to prepare people for a much wider array of jobs. And maybe we probably could have even envisioned when Jane and I were college students.

Jamie Merisotis, Lumina Foundation president & CEO:

So it's a very different system, and yet what we were talking about is the sort of outdated notions about sending people down these pathways that are dead ends. We've got to make sure that we are focusing people on the right pathways. That includes broad generalizable knowledge that's going to help you be successful long-term and near-term career opportunities that get you on the pathway of that lifelong of learning and working and serving others. And I think is key to this new human-work ecosystem that I've been talking about.

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

And we both went to institutions that are liberal arts institutions, Jamie. We should put that out there. And I love a broad liberal arts education. I want a world where there are fine arts majors and psychology majors and philosophy majors, that is not instead of getting real life skills. And because it's Global Skills Day, I just think there's no reason that you can't make students who graduate clearly be able to articulate the skills they've learned in that course and look for where they have holes. And it seems like we end up arguing with ourselves about liberal arts versus technical education, which is-

Jamie Merisotis, Lumina Foundation president & CEO:

False psychonomy. False psychonomy.

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

Right. Absolutely.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

We talked about the cost of education. There's a rethinking going on of how do we help people afford this? How do we come up with different financing? Jane, can you talk a little bit about that? Some ideas that are out there on how to make education affordable.

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

Jamie, how many times have we turned this question around and said, what's the cost of not being educated, not being well-skilled and well-educated? But I think Ramona, there are so many new models that are coming up with things like ISAs, income share agreements, things like community bonds and work bonds, only because historically the only person who's born the risk of the dollar and cents cost of education is the borrower and their family. We need to turn that around a little bit. We need to make sure that institutions bear some of the risks so that if they take \$50,000 a year for your education, you should be able to get a job that's equal to or greater than the \$200,000 that you and your family and the government have invested

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

And I think at least the conversations, I'm not sure that income share agreements will become the new normal. I don't think Title IV is in any danger of extinction, but I do think that it begins the conversation of, oh, you're right. There should be some risks to bear when an institution graduates someone unable to get anything more than a minimum wage job.

Jamie Merisotis, Lumina Foundation president & CEO:

Yeah. I think the question on financing is largely around what are the outcomes we're trying to achieve, right? And what we're trying to achieve is a much higher level of attainment, of educational attainment that is going to serve much more diverse populations than we've served a well in the past in order to help our economy, strengthen our democracy, and in the end improve our shared well-being. So when you're talking about the resources, the question is where does that risk sharing have to take place? There are clearly public and private benefit from getting an education. So you should pay, in my view, you should pay based on your ability and we should be doing all that we can as a society in ensuring that you are successful. I think the problem with the models in the past is that we assume that leading people to the door was our job in public policy, not getting them through. And getting them through turned out to be a much bigger hurdle for some students than actually getting in the door. That's the problem that I think we've got to face.

Jamie Merisotis, Lumina Foundation president & CEO:

We still have problems getting some students in the door, don't get me wrong, but this idea that we need to focus on ensuring that those who get there succeed and actually get those credentials is really important. One data point that sort of puts an exclamation point on this, particularly in the post-pandemic environment, it's the March jobs report because it's the best example that I can see of the

jobs reports so far in 2021. In the March jobs report, it showed that there was 916,000 new jobs created, right? So a lot of jobs created in that month. Of those 916,000 new jobs created, 7,000 went to people with a high school credential or less, all the rest went to people with a post-secondary credential. So that shows you how this new economy really is putting that exclamation point on skills, on the need to actually make sure that people have those credentials, some post high school credential, as Jane pointed out, not necessarily a bachelor's degree in such and such area, but a credential that will make you marketable in this rapidly changing ecosystem of work that we're facing.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

That actually leads to what I was just thinking about for the next question here is HR departments. I know that's part of this Global Skills Day, talking about HR departments and how they're looking at job candidates. Companies are flipping their switch there. They're saying, "I don't need that four year degree anymore. I need to hire based on skills." So how do they signal this, is credential the best way to do it? Because there's some people who don't even have those.

Jamie Merisotis, Lumina Foundation president & CEO:

Yeah. I'd love to hear Jane's cut on this. I will give you my sort of very quick, which is that I'm not sure I fully understand the skills versus credentials conversation yet. The best way to demonstrate skills is with the credential. The problem, I think is that the people pushing back on the credentials are really pushing back on bachelor's degrees. I think it's that credential that they're pushing back on. Most employers do not have the capacity of a Google or a PWC to assess skills in a way that they can do massive hiring in the way that large employers can. Most employers are small and medium-sized employers, they need to know that people know and can do certain things. And the workforce training certificate, the associate degree, whatever the credential is, is going to continue to be important. The question is what's behind those credentials and how do we know that people have actually gotten something out of that? To me, that's where the public conversation and the public policy conversation needs to be.

Jamie Merisotis, Lumina Foundation president & CEO:

Having said that, and this is the point that I think Jane knows a lot more than I do, I think we have to be careful about making sure that we don't put people in harm's way by simply credentialing them with credentials that have little value or that are preparing them for jobs or opportunities that are really short-term that don't give them the stepping stones for long-term success.

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

Yeah, I think that's so right, Jamie. I mean, if a credential doesn't have a valid assessment, if you just get a piece of paper for being in a seat for amount of time, you don't have the skills necessary for that job. And whether it's a blue collar job or a white collar job, really doesn't matter. I think where the bachelor's degree has been important to employers is that it's proof that you have an ability to persist and learn. It doesn't necessarily talk about your specifics, unless you're a nurse getting state licensed or a teacher getting state licensed about the specificity of your skills, but it gives you a very general look that this person can stick to it, do a two or four year degree and graduate. And in terms of, I wish I were as optimistic as you, Ramona, about the employers changing. I don't feel optimistic.

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

I think that well-intentioned CEOs are out there saying, "We're going to look at skills instead of degrees." And in reality, when it comes down to that poor HR manager, whether it's a small business or a large business, they know they're held accountable for, is that person able to do the job? And they are not just going for skills, they are going for credentials. And I think you have somebody leading up SHRM right now, in Johnny Taylor, who's really committed to diversity, but he has never said that he wanted diverse candidates that weren't qualified. So I think he's really being very careful and very attuned to the needs really, of his membership because you won't stay the HR director very long if your last 25 hires didn't last on the job for a week.

Jamie Merisotis, Lumina Foundation president & CEO:

That's right.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I think that's a very good point. And I am, I like to be optimistic, but I'm also realistic. So I think what you're saying there is really, really true. I want to talk about one more challenge that has really surfaced as well, and that's the digital divide. So we talk about money as maybe a hurdle for people to get the skills they need, but not having access to broadband is also another one. You can go online and learn things, you can get those credentials, but if you don't have the access, that seems to be a major impediment to me.

Jamie Merisotis, Lumina Foundation president & CEO:

I absolutely agree. And there's been a lot written in the last few months about hybrid learning and hybrid work and about how those digital skills are going to be more and more important. And I think that's true. I'm seeing this both as an analyst of the sphere of post-high school learning and also as an employer, that hybrid really is the sort of a word of the day here, that employees are demanding more agency, more control over their own work environments. I think that's overdue. I think that's a good thing. And learners are as well saying, well, there's some cases where the technology didn't serve people well, but there's some cases where it did serve them well. We learned a lot from this large unplanned experiment that COVID presented to us.

Jamie Merisotis, Lumina Foundation president & CEO:

And I think that addressing access to technology, really dealing with this fundamental question about who has access to this technology, how do they utilize it in both the learning and working spheres, it's going to be increasingly important. And this is a case where I think government does have to play a significant role in leveling that playing field, because it's not realistic to think that the learning providers or the employers are going to do that on their own.

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

Yeah. And I think this is kind of schizophrenia to say this, yes, absolutely access is important, but just as Jamie, you said earlier, we worried for decades in public policy about access to college. Well, now we're worrying about access to the broadband kinds of activities and internet in your home and things like that. We should simultaneously be pairing digital skills, because who's teaching anybody digital literacy? So few schools address it, and with young people, I think we're particularly vulnerable. I mean, we'll leave the older workers off because they're digital dinosaurs and may need specific attention, but for young people who we consider digital natives, many of them don't know how to use an Excel

spreadsheet, they don't know how to interpret it, they know how to use their smartphone for their social needs, but don't know really how to address doing research and figuring out quality, saying when is Wikipedia appropriate and when is it totally not appropriate.

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

So I think we have to do a lot better job of the digital skills that are required while we're worrying about access. I never want to not care about access first, but we need to make sure that somebody is taking leadership in saying, "We're going to teach these digital skills in K-12. We're going to reinforce them in higher ed." And every time you as an adult learner come back, we're first going to make sure you have the digital skills to really take advantage of the curriculum we're offering.

Jamie Merisotis, Lumina Foundation president & CEO:

And just to bring this back to the top where we started, which is that here talking about Global Skills Day, this is a global phenomenon that we are talking about. And over the course of the last six months on my book tour, I've participated in an array of global events. And these issues about the digital divide and access to technology and hybrid work and learning these things are universals. They are playing out in small and large countries, in developed and developing nations. It doesn't matter. Everyone is trying to figure this out in a world where we were all divided because of the virus, we came together because of technology and technology, I think, is going to have to be part of the solution even as we recognize the importance of the human interaction of our humanity that's come out of this pandemic.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

That's a great way to end this podcast, Jamie. So on that note, I want to thank you Jamie, for being on Work in Progress, and Jane as always, thank you as well.

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

Always fun to be with you.

Jamie Merisotis, Lumina Foundation president & CEO:

Delighted.

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

And Jamie.

Jamie Merisotis, Lumina Foundation president & CEO:

Likewise.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I was speaking to Jamie Merisotis, president and CEO of Lumina Foundation and Jane Oates, president of WorkingNation. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor in chief of WorkingNation. Thank you for listening.