

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:

Latinos will account for as many as seven out of 10 workers entering the workforce by 2025, according to a recent report, but they also represent 35% of workers without digital skills and 20% of those with limited skills. Diana Caba, Hispanic Federation, Assistant Vice President for Policy and Community Engagement with the Hispanic Federation joins me to talk about a new initiative they have and how we can help the Latino community and workers take part in the recovery. Diana, thank you so much for joining us.

Diana Caba, Hispanic Federation, Assistant VP for Policy and Community Engagement:

Thank you so much for having me, Ramona.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Tell me a little bit about Hispanic Federation's Latino Digital Accelerator, something that you've been doing for a while now, but has taken on more urgency post-pandemic.

Diana Caba, Hispanic Federation, Assistant VP for Policy and Community Engagement:

Yes. The Latino digital accelerator is a relatively new initiative for the Hispanic Federation. We have been around for about over 30 years with the mission to empower the Latino community through Latino institutions. These are Latino led, Latino serving, or community-based organizations. Most recently, a response to the fact that the Latino workforce is just growing exponentially, with seven out of 10 workers in the next 10 years.

Diana Caba, Hispanic Federation, Assistant VP for Policy and Community Engagement:

Latino, realizing also that a lot of those workers, as you mentioned in the stats you mentioned the introduction, are lacking critical digital skills to be able to work, to be able to progress in their careers, to be able to increase their financial security. This initiative actually began prior to the pandemic already with that foresight that the digital divide in the Latino community is wide and it needs attention and needs resources, a community-based resources to be able to address it.

Diana Caba, Hispanic Federation, Assistant VP for Policy and Community Engagement:

But with the pandemic has only been further exacerbated and really shows the pressing need not only for workforce opportunities, but just general to access resources, to connect socially. We always talk about the future of work, but the future of work is now.

Diana Caba, Hispanic Federation, Assistant VP for Policy and Community Engagement:

That is the intention of the Digital Accelerator to be able to support Latino serving organizations that are doing the work, that are in the community with the resources and expertise for them to grow their digital skilling initiatives, that in turn will prepare Latinos for the workforce of today and tomorrow, and the idea of creating a coalition of organizations working in this area to then further inform other groups that want to do this in their communities.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Why is it that the Latino community is lagging behind acquiring digital skills?

Diana Caba, Hispanic Federation, Assistant VP for Policy and Community Engagement:

The dire need for digital skills is a longstanding issue for communities of color in general. And before the pandemic, the digital divide has been especially detrimental to the economic prospects of Latinos of all ages. This stems from a variety of different issues from K through 12 education, access to opportunities. There's so much to be said in regards to that, but I think that we can all agree that the devastation the pandemic has caused has shed light on these deep rooted inequities, but has also offered the opportunity to see that digital access is no longer a luxury.

Diana Caba, Hispanic Federation, Assistant VP for Policy and Community Engagement:

It is a necessity that goes hand-in-hand with training, as well as access to equipment and physical connection to technology. Our point of view is that through our community-based organizations, that is a step that we can take in the right direction as part of a grander ecosystem when it comes to providing workers with opportunities to earn a living, to be able to support their families, and to be able to progress in their lives.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

How are you working with the community-based organizations? Are you providing money? Are you connecting them to programs?

Diana Caba, Hispanic Federation, Assistant VP for Policy and Community Engagement:

Through this Latino Digital Accelerator, that we are working with 24 community-based organizations throughout the country, specifically in 10 States and in Puerto Rico. Through the Accelerator, we have provided them with seed funding to either start a digital skilling program or enhance their digital skilling programs that they currently have, again, through the workforce training work that they do.

Diana Caba, Hispanic Federation, Assistant VP for Policy and Community Engagement:

In addition to the capital, we have developed a basic digital skilling and job preparedness curriculum, which was created also with input from the CBOs that we're working with and also additional research and also combining that with free tools that can be incorporated. And then these moves also had access to our general technical assistance and capacity building, which we are known for beyond the Accelerator. Again, it's part of our essential services that we provide to the organizations that we provide capacity building for.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Is there a different approach that you need to take in the Latino community culturally to make sure that they are being connected? Is there a cultural difference that you need to address when you are trying to make sure that the skills training is getting to the right people?

Diana Caba, Hispanic Federation, Assistant VP for Policy and Community Engagement:

Absolutely. The need for Latino focused education really ensures that participants are receiving culturally competent support to ensure success. Through this initiative, we did focus on organizations

that currently have some type of workforce development component to their programming, but they really provide all types of services.

Diana Caba, Hispanic Federation, Assistant VP for Policy and Community Engagement:

Again, these are for the most part grassroots or really hyper-local community-based organizations that are providing a variety of services from adult basic education, English for speakers of other languages, civics education, training for non-traditional pathways, and more.

Diana Caba, Hispanic Federation, Assistant VP for Policy and Community Engagement:

In addition to these wraparound services, these are organizations that continue to meet the gaps for their communities. For example, most recently with the pandemic, a lot of the relief services that some folks were not able to access.

Diana Caba, Hispanic Federation, Assistant VP for Policy and Community Engagement:

These groups basically provided those resources, whether it was relief services, hunger relief, cash assistance in addition to those wraparound services, but also meeting, again, the community where their needs are with regards to language as well, whether it's to provide digital skills in Spanish and also to provide the context combining the digital skills, the actual hands-on learning, with a job readiness information, especially for newly arrived immigrants or folks that are still learning the systems here in the United States to be able to provide that context.

Diana Caba, Hispanic Federation, Assistant VP for Policy and Community Engagement:

How do you apply for a job? How do you prepare a resume? How do you prepare for an interview? The idea with this program is to really, again, meet folks where they're at. Working with a wide variety of organizations has really shown us that there's also many different approaches depending on if someone is a beginner, if someone is more intermediate, or if someone's looking to expand into a tech career.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

The long-term vision of this is this jobs pipeline. You mentioned careers. How are you connecting that dot from the digital skills to the long-term career? Is there some kind of bridge program, or are those separate programs?

Diana Caba, Hispanic Federation, Assistant VP for Policy and Community Engagement:

The long-term vision for the Digital Accelerator, of course, is to establish a pipeline that leads to well-paying jobs. This starts with getting that data, that job market data, to know what jobs are available and what skills are in demand for the local markets. So that the organizations can then use this data to develop a curriculum that teaches the skills that leads to the jobs that are in demand.

Diana Caba, Hispanic Federation, Assistant VP for Policy and Community Engagement:

And then supporting, of course, the hybrid model that we find ourselves in now that is crucial to offering classes now during the pandemic and providing not only the instruction, but also the equipment and the connection. Again, lending libraries with laptops, hotspots for folks to be able to access, go online, and then to be able to familiarize themselves with the equipment that they need to acquire these digital skills. Also, ultimately, programs establishing partnerships with businesses...

Diana Caba, Hispanic Federation, Assistant VP for Policy and Community Engagement:

The training should go towards something, right? The training is going towards acquiring that job, but even better when you can partner with a business that already can state their needs and creating that match. Also, bringing in job developers and career coaches with the goal to help participants land the job. All of these are crucial in order to get someone from the training to the job to increase those prospects, and that is what we're working on with all of the grantees of this program at different levels.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I remember a shocking stat back in December when the Bureau of Labor Statistics came out and it said all the job losses in December of 2020 were women, but almost half of them were Hispanic or Latinos. How come they're so disproportionately impacted?

Diana Caba, Hispanic Federation, Assistant VP for Policy and Community Engagement:

That is a key insight that we gathered from the participants, from the grantees of this program, that first, well, pre-pandemic there were very high participation rates for in digital skilling programs. One of the groups that we worked with, Monument Impact out in California, their skilling program actually stems from the fact that they started as a day labor program, connecting day laborers to employment, which were predominantly male.

Diana Caba, Hispanic Federation, Assistant VP for Policy and Community Engagement:

But then when women started coming and looking for opportunities, they realized there was an opportunity there to increase their administrative and digital skills. That's how their program came about. Just in general, when it comes to opportunities for Latino women, there has been a greater disparity in comparison to other groups. We could even look at the statistics when it comes to how much Latina is paid in comparison to a white male. I believe it's about 40 cents to the dollar.

Diana Caba, Hispanic Federation, Assistant VP for Policy and Community Engagement:

That discrepancy has always been there and we want to try to address that by providing women with skills to access better paying jobs. As you mentioned, most recently Hispanic and Latino women have been disproportionately impacted due to the pandemic, low-paying jobs being the majority of the jobs that are held by this group. Those are the jobs that were most directly impacted by the pandemic.

Diana Caba, Hispanic Federation, Assistant VP for Policy and Community Engagement:

And in addition, these are women that are caregivers in their families, are the heads of household, have children that are at home because they couldn't go to school and they needed to have someone there to be with them. Those are all elements that impacted women's ability, Latinas especially, to work, to hold onto their jobs.

Diana Caba, Hispanic Federation, Assistant VP for Policy and Community Engagement:

Right now a lot of women, a lot of Latinas, are looking for these training opportunities for these low cost, free training opportunities to be able to meet the immediate needs of their families, to be able to help their children with their online schooling, and be able to acquire the skills to gain employment themselves. One of our grantees also mentioned the fact that the trainings are online now, how that has opened the possibilities for folks to be able to participate because they don't have to worry about traveling to a location.

Diana Caba, Hispanic Federation, Assistant VP for Policy and Community Engagement:

They don't have to worry about childcare. It has really increased the participation rates of Latino women in these programs.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

The digital divide is something that comes up a lot, whether it's access financially to laptops, the computers, the high-speed internet. How is that impacting this training? Because it is a good opportunity if somebody can't leave their home because they're caregivers to be able to work from home. But if you've got that divide there, how are you trying to solve that? Are you working with anybody that can help do that in different communities?

Diana Caba, Hispanic Federation, Assistant VP for Policy and Community Engagement:

Absolutely. That is something in addition to the access to the quality training, the access to equipment is the access to the actual connection. We've been engaging in a number of conversations. Most recently, we held a symposium on Latino digital skilling in which we were able to bring the acting chairwoman of the FCC, who really stated that the biggest challenge for everyone is how to identify, how to get every household and business and community connected to high-speed service. The future belongs to those who are connected.

Diana Caba, Hispanic Federation, Assistant VP for Policy and Community Engagement:

She said exactly those words. And that's something we want to work on too, because it's really trifold the success of this program. We already know that the demand is there. All the classes that our grantees have reported have been maxed out. They have seen record registration, but also completion of these classes. People want these trainings. The fact that folks with the pandemic are engaging in hybrid models to be able to serve the community.

Diana Caba, Hispanic Federation, Assistant VP for Policy and Community Engagement:

Really also, while these are community-based organizations, are seeing folks from outside of the traditional community that they've been helping because of the fact that being online has helped them expand their networks. And then, again, the access to actual equipment. Through this program, we've been able to help organizations create lending libraries, create computer labs where either the instructor can teach from there and folks can connect, or folks can borrow a laptop and be able to take the classes from home.

Diana Caba, Hispanic Federation, Assistant VP for Policy and Community Engagement:

They don't have to depend on maybe the one device that is available in their household, and a lot of times that one device tends to be a cell phone. There's something to be said about having an actual computer to learn these digital skills that are going to take you beyond being able to access something on your cell phone, but be able to translate into a job that requires these skills.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Digital skills are the basis of most jobs now. Everything's going to have some kind of tech component. What are some of the other projects that you guys are working on that might be helping connect the Latino workforce to jobs?

Diana Caba, Hispanic Federation, Assistant VP for Policy and Community Engagement:

Again, going back to our main mission to support Latino serving organizations, a lot of training also has to happen within the organizations that we support to be able to go from what we experienced at the beginning of the pandemic, the panic to pivot of how are we going to deliver these community programs. Normally all of these programs are in person are very, high touch, are very, one-on-one in many cases. We immediately started working with our network of organizations to provide the trainings, like how to take your program from in-person to online?

Diana Caba, Hispanic Federation, Assistant VP for Policy and Community Engagement:

What are the different tools to incorporate? We also were able to fundraise tremendously to be able to support organizations and provide them grants to keep the doors open, to continue providing these essential services across the board. Amongst the many different things that we do, of course, we still continue our focus on education, on immigration, on health, on vaccine outreach, civic engagement. The work really continues.

Diana Caba, Hispanic Federation, Assistant VP for Policy and Community Engagement:

And again, through our expanding network of partners, we do hope in addition to the Digital Accelerator providing that capacity building for the organizations, providing the access to equipment for participants, for students, and helping to establish that pipeline from training to employment, our goal as well as to inform the digital skilling ecosystem, especially when it comes to the focus on how to train and provide that cultural competency for Latino participants.

Diana Caba, Hispanic Federation, Assistant VP for Policy and Community Engagement:

We are working on assembling all of our findings that we've been able to collect over the past two years, including landscape assessments, how organizations have had to pivot their programming due to the pandemic, best practices that have come out of these conversations, the engagement that we've been able to cultivate amongst the grantees to share their resources, because these organizations, some have been working in digital skilling for quite some time. Some are incorporating it now into their different workforce programs.

Diana Caba, Hispanic Federation, Assistant VP for Policy and Community Engagement:

And again, a lot of these programs are not necessarily going from, all right, this is how you start to program or work on these super high tech programs. It really ranges from like basic digital skills, familiarizing yourself with the computer, from administrative skills, which we can say across the board you see, and most jobs you have to have some kind of digital competency. And then also that access to those higher paying tech focused jobs, especially since with regards to those types of jobs, Latinos really only make about 6% of that workforce.

Diana Caba, Hispanic Federation, Assistant VP for Policy and Community Engagement:

Our goal, again, is to provide that immediate assistance, see those results, and then inform the general ecosystem for anyone who's looking to either create a program like this in their community or to see how they can support the continual upskilling of Latinos.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

In addition to these basic skills that everyone needs for jobs, I know you're working with groups like Google to provide more advanced training into jobs that might lead, as you have said, to great careers, software development, et cetera. Tell me a little bit about what that pathway looks like.

Diana Caba, Hispanic Federation, Assistant VP for Policy and Community Engagement:

We are very fortunate to receive the support of Google.org and also continue to work with other entities interested in digital skilling for Latinos, and also within the network that we've been able to create amongst the grantees, because we have grantees, again, that work with folks at a very basic level and other grantees, for example, The Knowledge House in the Bronx, that has also been able to expand to other cities across the nation that are specifically working with young people of color to prepare them for tech careers and also providing that bridge between the training and also the connection with job opportunities.

Diana Caba, Hispanic Federation, Assistant VP for Policy and Community Engagement:

As we continue this program, the goal is to continue building out the curriculum that we've created so far, which is, again, basic job preparedness, access, digital skilling, moving it to more intermediate, and then the end goal, advanced skills, so that we can provide a variety of different curriculums to meet folks where they're at, to meet their needs and what they're looking to do. In addition, we're looking to see how we can continue to support different groups within our community.

Diana Caba, Hispanic Federation, Assistant VP for Policy and Community Engagement:

For example, small business owners, providing them with trainings for digital marketing and help to contribute to the sustainability of Latino owned businesses. Continue, again, the focus on newly arrived immigrants, providing that job preparedness background to be able to access quality jobs that they may have had preparation for already, but need that extra training and support. Younger adults who may be more comfortable with technology and have the potential to be leaders in the tech sector, but again, need that additional push.

Diana Caba, Hispanic Federation, Assistant VP for Policy and Community Engagement:

Senior citizens that are adapting to new technologies and may need support with finding a job or just keeping up with important digital skills that are not life skills. And again, to continue addressing the needs of our community, especially those severely impacted by the pandemic, looking for employment opportunities and looking for that job security and making sure that we're taking advantage of this moment to close that digital divide that has long existed.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Diana, thank you so much for joining us on the Work in Progress podcast.

Diana Caba, Hispanic Federation, Assistant VP for Policy and Community Engagement:

Thank you so much for having me, Ramona.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I've been speaking with Diana Caba, of the Hispanic Federation. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of WorkingNation. Thank you very much for listening.