

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You're listening to Work in Progress. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of Working Nation. Work in Progress explores the rapidly changing workplace through conversations with innovators, educators, and decision-makers, people with solutions to today's workforce challenges. Joining me today on the podcast is Andrew Stettner, senior fellow at the Century Foundation. Andrew, thank you for joining me.

Andrew Stettner, The Century Foundation sr. fellow:

Thanks for having me. I'm excited to talk with you.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I've been reading a lot and I'm watching a lot of interviews with you, and this is not a new subject to you. The idea of how technology is changing the way we work and at a rapid speed. So why don't you tell us a little bit about your point of view on where we're at right now, especially in light of the pandemic.

Andrew Stettner, The Century Foundation sr. fellow:

We've seen major shifts in technology over the last several decades under the broader rubric of automation is not the thing that we have generally responded to as a society. Starting, obviously, with the personal computer revolution that displaced over time, millions of secretarial position, for example, in our economy. And we really left those individuals largely on their own to find their new way. That was a certain piece of automation, but that is certainly increased in the last several years, especially during the pandemic when companies were forced to think about how to do business in new ways, without as many workers and meeting customer demand in new ways.

Andrew Stettner, The Century Foundation sr. fellow:

So whether it be the rise of the gig economy and online platforms and things that can be delivered to us with our cell phones, without the type of retail and other intermediary type of middlemen that had to be there in the past, or whether it be our factories that are buying and using industrial robots at record levels over the past several years into 2020, during the pandemic to produce additional goods through technology, and then they were able to do. So, it is a big factor. In my work and my perspective evolved, both displacing some workers from prior jobs, for sure. And those are the stories that get a lot of attention, but on a bigger scale, changing the way that work is done, changing the requirement for work, changing the skillset to do the same kinds of work. I think of it as really altering the workplace landscape as well as changing the mix of jobs and the economy.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You just said something earlier, too, that I thought was very important is before, a lot of people were left to fend for themselves. So those secretarial skills, those assistant skills, there was no conscious effort to help people find a new skillset or pathway. And that's changed a lot over the last few years. I've seen so many new programs out there that are trying to help people get the skills they need for jobs today.

Andrew Stettner, The Century Foundation sr. fellow:

Yeah, I think we're moving in that direction and you certainly have seen in more cases, large employers also being engaged in this, engaging in training their incumbent workforce. We think a lot more needs to

be done there, but that's going to be the most important thing. We really need companies to look at their own talent and say, "Okay, this person knows the company. They know how to work here. They know us. Let's go ahead and give them those additional digital skills," for example. Many of the types of work we're talking here are in fact, very types of deeply skilled work that is being done by hand in the past, that may be now automated in the future. Some of those underlying skills are very valuable, but people are going to have to have a new set of skills. Digital literacy is going to be important in nearly all jobs in our economy. And it's not ubiquitous among the current US population. We are recognizing that in our educational and training infrastructure.

Andrew Stettner, The Century Foundation sr. fellow:

So understanding the problem is the first step, and knowing that we have to get that training out in a much broader basis.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You've done a lot of research on the manufacturing sector and how it's impacted by the changing technology. Are we at a point in our society, our workforce, that you cannot work in a manufacturing plant without some kind of tech skill?

Andrew Stettner, The Century Foundation sr. fellow:

An increasing share of jobs in manufacturing, I never want to say all of the jobs, but increasing share of jobs are going to require some pieces of digital skills. If you are operating on a line, you're going to have to deal with a touch screen, you're going to have to deal with quality control measurements and you're going to have to be comparing what the computer is saying about that part moving through to what you can observe. In terms of manufacturing, in terms of the breakdown, it used to be that 80% of people working in manufacturing, their greatest education was a high school degree. That is down to 40% of people in manufacturing. The others at least have some post-secondary credential.

Andrew Stettner, The Century Foundation sr. fellow:

And this is a positive development for manufacturing in the United States. We are not going to be able to compete on a cost basis with Vietnam and China and other countries in terms of what labor hour will cost in America compared to Latin American and Asian countries. So we have to have this fist of technology to produce at a cost competitive rate, and that's what's really happening. So it's making us have a chance to be competitive and it's still a sector, although there are those digital skills required, that there are entry pathways for those workers that have a high school degree and then some short-term training or a post-secondary credential, but short all the way of a college degree. So it still is that on-ramp type of sector that you can get at and there is some areas for mobility.

Andrew Stettner, The Century Foundation sr. fellow:

But what I think has changed when we think about it being a job that you can purely do with your hands, you're going to have to come in there more with your, at least from the beginning, your eighth grade plus literacy and numeracy. And maybe for some of your listeners or the general public hearing this, that may not seem like a lot, but unfortunately, we have an educational equity in our country. We certainly have it having across the globe for many immigrants. So not everyone who's working, people that have worked for many years, had never had the opportunity to get that kind of literacy and numeracy.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Do we have enough workers to fill the job potential out there?

Andrew Stettner, The Century Foundation sr. fellow:

One issue we have is that manufacturers need an estimated 2 million workers over the next 10 years to meet both their recovery, but also this tremendous problem. In the factories I've visited... I've visited factories where every single person working on the factory floor was 60 years or older. They have to recruit a new generation of workers. So their methods of recruitment are simply not going to get the number of skilled workers in place to make the US manufacturing competitive. If these talent issues aren't resolved, the US manufacturing is not going to be able to be competitive on a global basis, and it will shrink over time. It will not meet its potential in terms of talent.

Andrew Stettner, The Century Foundation sr. fellow:

We need the people plus technology of manufacturing to have jobs here. America will always be the one that's advanced technologies, whether it be at MIT or in private industry. The question is, will we have the people plus technology to actually produce the things? And that's obviously where all the jobs are at. You're just inventing the products and that makes a few people very wealthy, but it doesn't create jobs and a shared prosperity.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Earlier this summer, you co-authored a report, a blueprint action about inclusion in the manufacturing sector. Tell me a little bit about what the premise of that report is.

Andrew Stettner, The Century Foundation sr. fellow:

I think what we really wanted to do when we studied were, there seems to be on its face, this huge win-win. You have communities of color in particular, in urban areas and also rural areas, looking for good jobs. And they have the manufacturing sector needing 2 million workers over the next 10 years. Can we translate that win-win into employment for individuals that need it in a sector that needs new workers? We examined what's required for them. And one piece that we talked about is that it's our training system and our employment approaches that need to change alongside our educational and training needs of the workers. It's not as if there's something wrong with the people that they can't be trained and placed in these jobs. What's wrong is the way we've been approaching this.

Andrew Stettner, The Century Foundation sr. fellow:

A piece of that is not just giving people the credentials and the skills that are needed, but also making sure there's the support services to succeed in those training programs. And also that you're working with the companies to change their corporate culture. When you're looking at a sector that's 70% male, 67% white, and you're trying to place people of color into those jobs, if you don't seek to change the corporate culture. And not just the statements by the CEOs, but the culture on the actual day to day shop floor, then you are not going to effectively integrate a new population into the factory.

Andrew Stettner, The Century Foundation sr. fellow:

You need to take intentional approaches in the way that you're bringing people in. We call it fostering racial belongingness and racial trust that has been divided between industry and community. What we found with companies and community groups, workforce providers, were working on it together and were making a lot of progress. And I'm talking the very simple stuff of when I came up, it was expected, I

was always going to be on time every single day, here at 6:00 AM. When we're thinking about integrating people that have kids or who are living in urban areas that don't have access to good public transit. Do we have a patient approach to understand that life can get here in the way, and then, "You can't make it. I'm going to try to help you figure out what's the barrier there. And there's something that we can solve together."

Andrew Stettner, The Century Foundation sr. fellow:

Also mentoring, how we connect with people that are coming up with other people that look like them and come from a similar background and how they've succeeded. And have that be part of the approach. So we saw some great success here, and obviously the foundation of that, you can't come in unless you have a willingness to learn as a worker, and ideally, some set of basic skills that the employer is looking for. And the advantage of manufacturing, we're seeing this spread across the country, is there are a set of what we call industry recognized credentials, curriculum that can be tested on, that's been worked on by industry and it doesn't take a long time to complete, at least the initial levels. So that gives all the people that are out in communities who can do the training, the guidance they need at least to get started on training a set of curriculum.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

In the report, you actually call out eight different organizations, community-based intermediaries. Are there any there that you want to call out on the podcast and tell us about what they're doing right?

Andrew Stettner, The Century Foundation sr. fellow:

I'd be happy to. This report studied those eight organization in depth. Among them, the Northland Workforce Training Center in Buffalo, New York. There are more than 10,000 unfilled jobs in Buffalo in advanced energy and manufacturing. And there are two state university institutions, one Alfred State, and one the SUNY Erie Community College, but they were not attracting individuals from Buffalo's east side, an African American neighborhood that once was a center of industry, but with the industrialization, lost those jobs that people could walk to at a living wage. For the most part, the manufacturing jobs that remain in the metro area are more than the suburbs. A pattern we've seen in city after city.

Andrew Stettner, The Century Foundation sr. fellow:

So the education, much of it, for example, Alfred State's also in the suburbs and the jobs in the suburbs, they created a new training center, they co-located that with manufacturing extension services and business development services in the east side of Buffalo, worked with the employers to understand what kind of credentials that they will want to use and have a set of community mentors and facilitators that are partnering with instructors, not just as your job placement, but also mentoring in what we call trauma informed support of the participants. When things that happen in our communities, we heard about people that had gunshot victims that multiple participants knew about and having the kind of approach that helps people work through that trauma and stay within a program.

Andrew Stettner, The Century Foundation sr. fellow:

So they have placed, just in several years, several hundred individuals in manufacturing jobs that are getting post-secondary credentials from the State University of New York. They're short term so they can lead into eventually, four year degrees and they can become well paid, living wage jobs. And so reconnecting that African American community where it's needed, successful people from all over the

community are coming back to this east side of Buffalo training center. People are chomping at the bit or like the officials that are white are sending their kids to this facility back in a forgotten part of Buffalo. So that was a great example of a success story in a community that's had a lot of hard times.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And finally, as we wrap up, what would you like to see on local, state, national levels from the policymakers to how to make sure that this is something that's implemented around the country, these kinds of ideas?

Andrew Stettner, The Century Foundation sr. fellow:

Yeah. We're looking for support for what we call racially conscious industry partnerships. So we only solve this problem if we support their whole policy, the development of industry partnerships, those have industry at the table, community colleges at the table and community-based organizations at the table, but they are charged as part of their mission to focus on equity, in terms of who they're recruiting, who they have at the table and how they're measuring their outcomes. We are expecting, and we've seen it already through the American Rescue Plan and the funding that was delivered through that and we're seeing it and being proposed in the Build Back Better plan, a set of investments and workforce training and industry partnerships.

Andrew Stettner, The Century Foundation sr. fellow:

But really, as those are implemented, bringing a focus on diversity, equity and inclusion into those efforts as a mandated requirement, as something that's really being thought through and planned, and it's different in every community, but it's something that needs to be at the heart and soul of these efforts.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Andrew, thank you very much for taking the time out of your busy day to join me on Work in Progress.

Andrew Stettner, The Century Foundation sr. fellow:

It was good talking to you.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I've been speaking with Andrew Stettner, a senior fellow at the Century Foundation. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of Working Nation. Thank you for listening.