

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. I'm joined today by Ryan Stowers, the Executive Director of the Charles Koch Foundation. Thank you very much for joining me.

Ryan Stowers, Charles Koch Foundation ex. director:

Thank you, Ramona. It's great to be here.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

We've met before and we've talked a little bit. But for those unfamiliar with the Charles Koch Foundation, what's the mission behind it?

Ryan Stowers, Charles Koch Foundation ex. director:

You need start with the individual, and our perspective is, is that every individual has unique and extraordinary potential. But given a lot of the challenges that people face, barriers have been put into people's lives preventing them from reaching that potential. And so, the foundation's mission is to partner with social change entrepreneurs to remove the barriers that prevent people from reaching their potential. We do that through funding research that sheds light on some of the most challenging issues that we face in society. And then where we're spending a lot of time right now is really honing in on the barriers that people are facing within education and their learning potential and their ability to reach their potential through learning, especially in the post-secondary ed space. And I'm anxious to talk to you about that today.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Let's start with some of the big barriers that you're seeing in. We'll get to education shortly, but what are you seeing? What's standing in people's ways?

Ryan Stowers, Charles Koch Foundation ex. director:

The barriers that we've decided to hone in on are where... Academics. A lot of the research we fund is supporting academics at their respective institutions, doing state of the art research that hones in on some of this. So one of the examples for instance, is the current criminal justice system. Another example is the immigration policies and the culture around immigration, the challenges that people face, the barriers people face, if they're trying to enter this country and get their feet underneath them and really succeed. So I can give you just a couple of examples. So if you look at the criminal justice space, two researchers that we're excited about. One, Steve Slivinski at Arizona State University. He's found in his research that there's a clear relationship between occupational licensing burdens and recidivism. So people face significant challenges in getting a license in order to do a specific job after they've come out of the criminal justice system.

Ryan Stowers, Charles Koch Foundation ex. director:

They're more likely once they face that barrier to go back into the system. And we believe that by supporting academics that are doing research like that, getting that valuable information into the debate, into the conversation. Another one, Brandon Garrett at Duke University. He's got a focus on driver's license suspension, and the implications that has on people who have been recently released

from the criminal justice system. Turns out that if you don't have a driver's license, your ability to earn a living becomes much more difficult, and that becomes a barrier to those individuals reaching their potential.

Ryan Stowers, Charles Koch Foundation ex. director:

So those are some examples. And like I pointed out at the onset, education, as it turns out, we feel like we've got a comparative advantage, we've been investing philanthropically in the education space for several decades now. And we see numerous barriers facing people entering... Within that system, coming out of that system. And especially as people try to connect with jobs and opportunities that allow them to reach their potential we see, unfortunately, a target rich environment when it comes to barriers. And where we're finding a lot of success is supporting social change entrepreneurs that are coming up with those solutions. So in the ed space, we're not just supporting research, we're supporting some of the solutions and that's been thrilling and inspiring to see.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You guys put out a study earlier. I think it was the beginning of September that was talking about how most Americans believe that college is not actually meeting their needs when it comes to careers. And that's driving some of your additional funding then, those kind of research findings?

Ryan Stowers, Charles Koch Foundation ex. director:

Yeah. I think that that study... That we learned a lot through that study. I think one of the biggest learnings that occurred is that we as individuals, institutions, organizations that are honing in on how to really drive change in innovation in this space, none of us involved are paying enough attention to the learner voice. And even if we say that we are, a lot of times we're coming up with our perspective on what that voice says, and then applying it to... We're kind of creating their voice for them, for lack of a better way to describe it. So just one data point 72% of the people that we hold, expressed a preference for an option other than a four year college or university. And yet most of the conversation when it comes to innovation and trying to drive change, most of the debates focused on 18 to 22 year olds, the current system, the status quo. We think that that needs to fundamentally change.

Ryan Stowers, Charles Koch Foundation ex. director:

The potential for learners, when we think of learners is much, much larger than 18 to 22 year olds. And we like to think of lifelong learning. You mentioned even before we started this podcast, you're still a learner. I'm definitely still a learner. And given the dynamic nature of today's economy, we can be in a position to always be learning and have the ability to pivot to new opportunities. The post secondary ed system needs to take that into account. And it needs to innovate in a way where all learners have the opportunity to engage within a system in a highly individualized way, that allows them to discover and develop and deploy knowledge and skills based on who they are. So a highly individualized approach. And it seems like most of the debate doesn't take that learner voice into account. And I think that's why we're missing the mark in so many instances.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I think we've grown up in a society where the conversation is go to college and that's how you find your career. But in fact, I mean, we've looked at the numbers here and in fact, it's like one in three people have an actual four year degree. You can find a good career without going to college. But I think you're

right about that. I don't think that's in the debate as much. I think there's a stigma around trade schools. There's a stigma around some type of occupation that isn't knowledge based these days.

Ryan Stowers, Charles Koch Foundation ex. director:

Honestly, I think one of the biggest challenges we face is just changing the way that we all think and act about learning. I think if we had a system, or rather a multiplicity of options that allowed people to first discover who they are, what their aptitudes are, what their strengths are, what their weaknesses are, and then help them develop knowledge and skills based on who they are, and then help them connect to opportunities based on who they are to gain employment and engage in the workforce, I think the outcomes would be dramatically different than what we're seeing right now. I think there's so much mismatch within the system. So the data... You'll be familiar with this, but 30 to 35% of the labor force in the U.S., that's 50 plus million Americans, feel like they have skills that are mismatched with their current job.

Ryan Stowers, Charles Koch Foundation ex. director:

And then if you look at people within... You mentioned the kind of check the box approach to education, only a third of students in that system right now believe that they'll graduate with skills that will help them in the workplace. What does all this mean for us? I think we need to step back and dramatically rethink the way we think about learning and work.

Ryan Stowers, Charles Koch Foundation ex. director:

And then I want to touch on one other thing you said, and it's finding purpose in work. We think that the best way to find purpose in work is what we call mutual benefit. If people can figure out a way to add value for other people, including themselves, but adding value in people's lives, creating products and services that make people's lives better or doing work that makes someone else's life better. That that mutual benefit, that relationship that can be found through doing work can give significant purpose and meaning to a person's life. And in a lot of instances, because people have been mismatched on who they are, what their aptitudes are, they don't ever even have a chance to figure that latter part out because it's been mismatched from the onset.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I want to pick up on this idea of who is responsible, how do we resolve this education situation. Who is responsible for fixing it?

Ryan Stowers, Charles Koch Foundation ex. director:

I think there are multiple answers to that. So first of all, learners need to take some ownership. And I think the institution need to allow this, but again, not just learner voice, but think it's what Michael Crow's calling agent learner. So people that have a desire to create, to discover and create their own pathway based on who they are, and own the outcomes own their credentials, own their ability to represent themselves to future employers and others that need to know who they are and what they're good at and how they can contribute. But that won't be enough. If you look at the transformation that Michael's driving at ASU, for instance, he's flipped something on its head, it's really important. And that is that the role of Arizona State University in society has become one of inclusivity instead of exclusivity. They're looking at their role as how can we reach as many learners as possible in a way that helps them reach their potential.

Ryan Stowers, Charles Koch Foundation ex. director:

And in a lot of instances, if you talk to a... Whether they say this or not, a lot of institutions around the country are focused in the exact opposite way. Who are the elite students we can get, because they're fit for our institution. And that approach has left so many behind. Millions of Americans that have been pushed out of the system because they didn't cut it, or they didn't feel good enough. And then what's impossible to quantify Ramona, and I'd love to get at this, but it's the number of people who came out of high school or some form of education who never even felt like they were good enough to even attempt. They never even viewed themselves beyond high school as learners.

Ryan Stowers, Charles Koch Foundation ex. director:

That to me is a tragedy. There are millions of those American in the country that view themselves in that way. I think all of us, I think learners, philanthropists in our case, institutions of higher learning ed entrepreneurs, as well as those within the traditional space, parents, ultimately government policies need to be more conducive to this, even though that's not the space I focus on. We all need to change the way that we think and act about education. And until we get out of our own way and really drive change within the system and allow some of these changes to occur, we're going to continue to have the same results.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I think there's also a big role for businesses and employers in there as well.

Ryan Stowers, Charles Koch Foundation ex. director:

Yes, yes. I missed that. You're right.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I just read a Harvard study. It's called the hidden worker and interviewed Joe Fuller. One of the co-authors of it. The study looked at AI as a screening device. A big company could have, I think we were talking about 500 applications for a job, maybe even more. So they screen in and screen out people. And one of the common screens is, did you go to college? So as soon as that screen is... If you answer no, you're out of the mix. You're not considered for a job. And it doesn't take into account the skills part of it. Or the person's ability to learn a new role. So I think there's a part of business that needs to own this too.

Ryan Stowers, Charles Koch Foundation ex. director:

Yeah. And I can't believe I missed it. I think that they may right now be the most important group, Ramona. I think you're spot on. I think the demand side of this equation has got to engage in a way where they're problem solving, not just expecting the problems to be solved and then react. They've got to drive some of the change. And I think you're seeing this. In fact, I talked to an executive this morning at a major privately held corporation who sees this challenge in the finance and accounting part of his industry. And they're working to drive change. They're working to identify people who have these aptitudes, bring them in, skip the requirement that you just outlined. Both in their higher practices, but even more aggressively than that. And then train them in-house or get some hybrid training with local institutions and give them alternative forms of credentialing with some of those learning institutions, and then get them working full time and in a job. Hit the ground running.

Ryan Stowers, Charles Koch Foundation ex. director:

So that's just one example. You're seeing some employers innovate on some margins. You're seeing other employers with a loud megaphone saying that they're going to innovate, but not necessarily always innovating at the level that they need to, within the details that you're describing when it comes to hiring, when it comes to selecting individuals. I think the employers have a huge opportunity right now to send a really strong signal and to drive change. Let me just tell you of two examples that come to mind that I think highlight what's possible. And I know you're familiar with these groups, but SkillUp, the project that just launched with over 60 different organizations coming together and partnering everything from employers to philanthropists, to entrepreneurs and, and ed providers. And then learners, potential learners coming together in a way that those signals that we're talking about are being sent much more directly.

Ryan Stowers, Charles Koch Foundation ex. director:

And they're being sent in a way where people can actually connect the dots and solve the problems. And so you look at SkillUp, it's an app based adaptive program that helps people discover who they are. Specifically people that have been displaced as a result of COVID, helping them then connect with new opportunities to gain new skills. I didn't use upskill to gain new skills, and then even better, connecting them with specific jobs at places like Walmart and a handful of other institutions. And they're just getting started. And that they're now looking at regional focus areas.

Ryan Stowers, Charles Koch Foundation ex. director:

I think that's an example of people coming together and totally changing the way that we think and act. And if you hear some of these stories, I know they've reached about a half million workers. And like I said, they're just getting started. But if you hear some of these stories, they're one or two on YouTube, there's one, Brianna she's on YouTube telling her story about what this can actually... She was a janitor that realized she had the aptitude and potential to be an IT worker and went through the SkillUp program, connected to an ed provider, and now she's working as an IT professional. And in a matter of months. With the certification she needs in order to even pivot, if she decides to pivot. That pivot's now lower cost for her. So incredible examples of where, if employers will work with some of these intermediaries, change the incentive structure, massive change can be accomplished.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I have some stuff on that on our website. So I'll be happy to link into this article, if anybody listening wants to check it out. Talking about the employers... And you were talking about the criminal justice system, there's... Ban the Box has been a very big campaign. Where do you guys stand on that?

Ryan Stowers, Charles Koch Foundation ex. director:

We fully support it. And I can't speak on behalf of Koch Industries, the company. But Charles' company has been a big proponent of that effort, and has made huge strides. And then I know there have been a handful of others, but we're a big supporter of that kind of... Again, that kind of signal that can be sent from really powerful employers to ban the box. You brought up criminal justice and this nexus with education, another program we've supported, that's been very successful is the mikeroweWORKS Foundation. So Mike Row, dirty jobs. He's-

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Oh, right, right. Yes, Absolutely.

Ryan Stowers, Charles Koch Foundation ex. director:

He's phenomenal at this. And his whole focus is changing the way that people who are trying to engage in the vocational trades, trying to get rid of that stigma and demonstrating that people can do that successfully without wasting a lot of time and money on a four year degree. And that it's a virtuous, and an important role that they can play in society. But there's an example. He's got the scholarships that they give out, and the S.W.E.A.T. Pledge, it's the mikeroweWORKS S.W.E.A.T. Pledge. It's an alternative credential that allows people to demonstrate things like work ethic, honesty. John Fitzpatrick applied for one of these scholarships. I think this is also available on YouTube, his story. He applied from prison and the video goes through his story about how he qualified for the program, got the scholarship, started in work study in prison.

Ryan Stowers, Charles Koch Foundation ex. director:

And then when he got out, went on to a different learning opportunity. And now he's fully engaged in full-time employment in the area that was based on who he was, and certified with this S.W.E.A.T. Pledge. And what's so great about John is now he's giving back, he's become a social change entrepreneur, and he's going out and trying to help other people who are incarcerated, get access to programs like the mikeroweWORKS scholarships. It's a great example of... People really working to give people a second chance. John's story, he made some bad choices, and he was put into prison, but these people need help to get back out in a way that can help them get on their feet and reach their potential. And groups like the mikeroweWORKS Foundation are doing a great job of it. And they're just one of many.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

We've told the story quite a few times, actually, in private conversations of The Last Mile. And I'm not sure if you're familiar are with them, but they are in prisons in six states now. And they teach coding and entrepreneurship to inmates who are scheduled to be released, I think within a certain time period. And there's some amazing success stories. And on top of that, everybody who's graduated from that program in I think it's six years now, there has been no recidivism at all.

Ryan Stowers, Charles Koch Foundation ex. director:

Incredible.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Giving somebody that opportunity to show what they can do and not have the stigma of a past mistake really can be life changing.

Ryan Stowers, Charles Koch Foundation ex. director:

This, I think highlights, the problem is the current system labels people like John in a way where they're not potential learners. I think that's the tragedy of all this and the opportunity, if we want to look at it in a positive way, the opportunity we've got to drive real change, because that's just not the case. John's got extraordinary potential. He made some mistakes. Let's come up with these programs and let's break down even more barriers so that folks like that who are marginalized for whatever it may be, to have

the chance to engage in a process to help them reach a higher place, to reach a better a place for themselves and their families.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

This brings us to that point again about the sense of dignity, the sense of purpose that you get from a job. To being able to support your family, to be able to go to sleep at night and not worry about your finances. And that I understand since we we've spoken about this a little bit before, that's very important at the heart of what you do with the foundation.

Ryan Stowers, Charles Koch Foundation ex. director:

It's at the heart of who Charles is as well. And it's certainly at the heart of his philanthropy, this idea that every individual has extraordinary potential comes directly from him. I was out there last week and he was telling me about a story of a gentleman that was working there as a janitor. And they discovered that he actually had aptitudes in other areas. And now like 10 years later, he is leading a department within one of their finance areas. So, and it's not just a job. It's allowing people, we think, allowing people to discover who they are, what they're good at, what they're not good at, what they're passionate about, and then gaining knowledge and skills based on who they are, and then connecting them to the opportunities where they can create value for themselves and for other people. That recipe, that combination of components in a person's learning and career pathway is the sweet spot that we found that that's where people find that kind of fulfillment, that kind of self-actualization.

Ryan Stowers, Charles Koch Foundation ex. director:

And we feel like the current system puts a lot of in front of people reaching that point. That's absolutely critical to what we're trying to do in our philanthropy. We're seeking partners to help us find the best bottom up solutions that can get it exactly what you're describing. Because every person does have extraordinary potential. And you're right. We need to acknowledge that every person has that kind of potential. We need to afford them that kind of dignity and respect. And then all of us working in this space need to work diligently to come up with the solutions, to provide the answers, to help them get there.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Thank you, Ryan. It really is a pleasure to talk to you.

Ryan Stowers, Charles Koch Foundation ex. director:

You as well. Ramona. Thank you.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

My guest has been Ryan Stowers, the Executive Director of the Charles Koch Foundation. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, Editor in Chief of WorkingNation. Thank you for listening.