

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:

CompTIA is the nonprofit trade association representing the global tech industry. That's more than 2,000 member companies and 3,000 business partners across the worldwide technology industry, also about 75 million professionals who take part in that industry. Todd Thibodeaux is the president and CEO, and he's my guest today on the podcast. Welcome.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

Great to be here.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Todd, I want to start with talking about the health of the industry. It has been a strong job-growth industry over the past decade or more. And even during the pandemic, there were still needs for IT workers, cybersecurity workers, people in the tech industry who could help build strong systems and also monitor them. Where do you see us now in the industry? How is it continuing to be this strong?

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

The tech industry as a whole has almost been recession-proof over its history. I think going back to the dawn of the modern age of the tech industry, which I see as 1979/8-ish time period when we started to see computers come into offices, when we started to see businesses really start to embrace information technology, we haven't had a period during that time where we've had any diminution really in the growth path for tech. And certainly, in the workforces, that's evolved over time.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

We have about 10 million people who work in the tech industry in the US today. About half of those people work for a tech company, oftentimes not even in a tech role. Sometimes the biggest job categories within some of these tech companies actually are in sales, finance, operations, account management, not necessarily technology.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

Then the other half of that 10 million work in a tech job for a non-tech company. And you're starting to see more and more companies classify themselves as being tech, including the hospitality industry, some of the retail industry. And these are people that are actually probably working in some of the more core jobs.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

And then we see an outer circle to that, which are people that are in a really tech-immersive job where they're using technology and systems, but they're not necessarily building platforms and networks and doing cybersecurity, some of the things you mentioned there. But it's just been a very strong global phenomenon over the last several years.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

And we see all over the world, there are just big gaps of talent pools where companies need more people. And it's not just the big-name companies. That's the other misnomer about tech employment. A lot of times, the media will focus on Silicon Valley and use that as a proxy for the tech industry and employment.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

And when you see some layoffs, which are happening in some companies now, and you're starting to see some people maybe slowing their hiring, that's not the case in the rest of the tech employment space. You have lots of medium and small-sized companies who are dying for talent, and they're not slowing down their hiring at all.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

So on a worldwide basis, we're seeing the same phenomenon, whether it's here in the US, whether it's in South America, UK, Africa. Wherever you go, we need more tech talent.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I think you make a good point there because every company probably has a tech role, even a small company. If they do their online banking or if they do online sales, they need someone who probably can manage that. So everybody needs these skills for their businesses. So how are we supplying the people into those jobs? What is the pathway?

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

Talk about the salaries. The average salary for tech employees in the US is close to \$110,000 a year. So we're talking about very substantial family-sustaining wages for people that are working in tech. And those wages have grown faster than they have in some other categories.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

As it relates to the pipeline to get talent into this, we had so many people in the early years, even up through the '90s, that were geeks. People that wanted to come in and be in these tech roles because they just love the technology, they love building these computers, they love building these networks. And it was predominantly white men who moved into this space.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

I think what happened in the dot-com boom is we started to see things like outsourcing come in. We started to see entire companies go under as a lot of these companies that were building themselves up through the Y2K transition, that were building themselves up through some of the things that were happening in the dot-com boom, some of that went bust a little bit after that.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

And tech started to become, following that... It was sexy up to that point. I think it lost some of its sexiness a little bit during that period. And you started to see people kind of shying away from it because it didn't appear outwardly to be that secure of an industry, even though it was.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

And I think what happened during that time is we started to see a de-emphasis of tech curriculum in schools. As schools went more towards coding and things, they kind of lost that tech infrastructure training that they were providing to students about computers and networking, cyber. You're starting to see that come back in now as we start to see this emphasis on STEM as well.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

It actually minimized the amount and breadth of tech exposure that kids were getting to all the different careers that were possible for them. And it did get narrowed down to, well, if you're going to work in tech, you must be working in coding, right? This idea that coding were the only tech jobs that were out there.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

So the combination of seeing people being outsourced, offshored, the dot-com bust, the implementation of this emphasis on math and coding within the schools, it took away some of that tech education, that computer tech education that we saw traditionally. And that pipeline slowed down a little bit there.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

Then we saw the universities minimize those programs again in favor of coding. So coding sucked a little bit of the wind out of the tech pipeline for a period of time, but I think we're seeing that change a little bit. Cybersecurity is becoming more important as cloud computing is becoming more important, as the infrastructure for IoT, smart cities.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

Some of these infrastructure pieces are coming back into the forefront. You're starting to see more exposure to people seeing those as long-term job career options.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

But I think in general, we're dealing with a challenge in the pipeline which is more about the confidence gap that's emerged here, where people think, "I can't do that job. I don't have the skills. I don't have all the things that people are telling me I need to have. I need to be a math and science genius to work in tech, don't I? I need to have all these skills around engineering or robotics or all these other things that people think they need to have."

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

And so what's emerged is this confidence gap has grown and grown and grown over the last 10 to 15 years where right now, the tech industry has the largest confidence gap of probably any industry where people are looking at it and being like, "I can't do that. I'd sooner be able to do nursing than be able to do a tech job if you were starting with no skills." When in fact, that's not true. It's probably one of the more accessible careers.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

When you get into the right kind of training, when you get into the right kind of learning environment, the skills can be acquired relatively quickly. Less than nine months, you can be prepared to start in a lot of these entry-level tech jobs and even some of the medium ones as well.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

So I think that's the thing we're dealing with now is trying to get as many people as possible over this confidence gap so they realize, yeah, you can do this. You have the skills or you can acquire the skills relatively easily. And I think that's one of the big challenges we're facing right now.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You talk about the confidence gap. How do we correct for that? How do we change that mindset and show people that they have a future in this career?

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

What we need to start with is exposure to what actually is required to pursue some of these job roles earlier for kids and also for parents. Parents still play a really, really big role in determining what kinds of careers kids think are within their reach.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

That's a little bit less with Gen Z because Gen Z is relying on random people on TikTok to tell them about what kinds of things that they can do and what kinds of things are possible, which scares me a little.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Me too.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

But they're still relying on role models. They're still relying on parents. They're still relying on teachers, other people that are within their space to give them this guidance.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

We just need to arm these individuals with more information that's honest and real, letting them know that you don't have to be a math and science genius to get started in a cyber career, that all these people are not coming out of university programs.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

The majority of people who are working in tech did not have a tech degree when they come into these jobs. They come into it from other fields that you can transition, that you can get real-world skills through certification programs like ours, through great community college programs, through other training providers that are out there, through self-study, live online training.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

There's a whole bunch of different options that are emerging now. And we're increasingly trying to put a lot of real-world application into our training so that we can make people job-ready on day one.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

And the skill sets that are required are good problem-solving skills, curious, having grit, having good durable skills, soft skills, whatever you want to call those today. Being able to work effectively with

others, communication. All these different pieces are really important. And nowhere in that does it say you need to be great at math or you need to be great at science to be able to do some of these jobs.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

So we need to get that information earlier into the hands of schools, into the hands of parents, into the hands of students so that kids can say... they can start to think about these options. It doesn't mean they'll take them. It doesn't mean they'll pursue them. But at least they'll have an honest broker telling them what's really true about what you need to be successful in these fields, and I just don't think that's happening today.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

Again, going back to the coding issue, schools just said, "Oh, coding, check. STEM, we're done." Most of those kids who do those mandatory coding programs and schools like New York State requiring all students to take a coding class, almost all those kids won't be coders.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

So making them take this class, maybe disenfranchising them from what they think tech can really be about, helps eliminate a bunch of people from the pipeline from day one as opposed to giving them a broad perspective. Because we've identified about 30 different job roles which are key to the tech workspace.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

And what we'd like to do is begin educating as many people as possible on those different fields, showing them what it's like to live a day in that job, what it's like to acquire the skills. How do you do it? How long does it take? How much does it cost? How would you go about it? Where are these jobs? Are they growing? How much do they pay? All the different things around that so that people can make a good choice. We just have to get that information out more broadly to people.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

We do a survey every six months where we track the number of people who are looking to change their careers, either upgrade their existing field that they're in or to look for a new field that they want to move into. And right now, that number's about 50 million, which is, historically, an extremely high number.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

It's about a third, almost a third, almost 30% of the adult workforce is looking for these new options. So we need to get to them too in some ways. It needs to start in that maybe 10th, 11th, 12th grade. But then we need to catch those adults later who are career changers as well since they're so integral to feeding that tech pipeline. We have to have people who are transitioning from other fields.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

One of the complaints that we've heard over the years is that the industry is still not as diverse as it should be. And I think you touched on something just now, which is role models, people talking about the career possibilities that are there, seeing someone who does that job in your own life. So if there's

already a lack of diversity, who is changing that model? And how do you change that model? How do you increase the talent pool?

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

Yeah. This is one of the biggest challenges the industry faces. The demand is way more than we're going to get from white men, so we need to move beyond that and we need to make sure that we're creating an environment where those individuals feel welcome, where they see individuals like themselves. But it does start, like you said, with role models.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

So when we've done some of this confidence gap research, the confidence gap is bigger in rural areas. It's bigger among women. It's bigger among people of color than it is among white men or women.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

So this idea that if you're a young, say, African-American who lives in rural Alabama, you probably don't know too many people who work in the tech industry, partly because there's not maybe a lot of tech companies in your area or for whatever reasons relative to the demographics of that area. So it's really tough for you to see yourself in that role.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

So I think organizations like ourselves, we need to do more to find those people who are working in those jobs and highlight them in tools and information sets that we can make available to people. So we're looking at completely redesigning our website to create these experiential explorations that people can go.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

And we're going to profile six or seven people for each of those 30 job roles that I mentioned. And we're going to make sure that that list of people is diverse, that people can see others like themselves. So that's the role that we're going to try to play in that.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

We have other DE&I initiatives that we're doing. We actually quit lobbying as an organization because we wanted to spend more of the money on diversity initiatives than we thought we were getting value from doing this lobbying. Why should we lobby to help trillion-dollar companies when we could take the money we were spending there and put it into programs?

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

Some of the money that we're investing there will go into the middle schools to help create digital awareness, digital literacy among middle schools, students, and their parents. Because the more that we can get the parents of some of these minority audiences to think and dream that their kid can work in these industries, the better.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

It can't just come from role models that are working in the industry already. It has to come from role models that are close to them, so more people around young people. And job changers too need to see

others and recognize that they're welcome, that they're needed, that there's good opportunity for them, that there's challenging opportunity. And we just haven't done a good job.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

I think, for so long, as I said, we lived off the sexiness of the industry. Doesn't everybody want to work in tech? Well, right now, that's not the case. Right now, we don't have everybody who wants to work in tech. We actually have to work harder to recruit these people.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

And it's time for everybody to wake up to that. We're just not going to have this steady stream of people. We actually have to go out and find them, and we have to do it in new and different ways.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You mentioned that you're going into middle schools. I know you partner with a lot of different academic institutions to help get that word out, but also train and certify people. What kind of certifications are you offering?

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

We have a range of certifications now. I think the number is around 14 now. We're the world's leading provider of what are called vendor-neutral foundational IT certifications. So if you want to get a job as a help desk professional or a tech support specialist, we have CompTIA A+.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

If you want to get a foothold in the computer networking space as a network administrator or a cloud administrator, we have Cloud+ and Network+. Security+ is the world's leading foundational cybersecurity credential. I think almost 700,000 people worldwide hold this certification. It's the most widely held cybersecurity credential in the world. So we provide these pathways.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

But I think what we're going to try to adjust to is something which is more job-role based where it's not just about going and getting an individual credential, but it's preparing someone to do that job. And that's a lot different.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

When you're studying for a test, it's different than learning to do a job. Our credentials will be a part of that process, but they can't be the only thing because some people need a longer runway. A lot of these certification programs, people can train for them in five to seven days.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

There's no way you can prepare to do a job if you don't have any skills or background in five to seven days. You're going to need 30 days. You're going to need 60 days. You're going to need 900 hours. However long that ends up being.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

So we're going to try to provide a lot more options for how people can consume this. This is where academic partners come into play with community colleges, which have been our closest allies in this process. Western Governors as an online university is a huge partner of ours and they're doing a fantastic job in helping to prepare people for these.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

The people who are not doing a good job are the general universities. For the longest time, we would get this stiff arm from them when we'd go to talk with them about working with them on things. We'd say, "We can help you. We can map our certification learning objectives against your curriculum and tell you where you have holes."

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

And usually, they would say, "No, we're good. We educate, you train." So we would get this really dismissive kind of comment about, "Yeah, we're better than you." But then we would do the mapping ourselves and understand that they were probably covering maybe 40% of what they should be covering, even though they considered themselves one of the top programs. And we saw this time and again with many universities.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

There's a few progressive ones like Arizona State who really understands what it means to drive the workforce and what it takes to prepare people for these jobs, that it's not just a knowledge dump. That's kind of what college has become. It's just this big knowledge dump.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

And that's what high school has kind of become. It's just this big knowledge dump which prepares people to take SATs and ACTs or prepares them to go to school. And then when you're in college, when you're done, you can't really do anything. Most degrees don't even prepare you to do the jobs.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

You ask any employer when they take fresh college grads, they have to train them for six to nine more months before they can even really do anything because they don't come out with skills, where our programs are more about giving people competencies and having them be job-ready.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

We want all the people who come from our programs to be 80% job-ready on day one so that an employer says, "Yeah. Okay, I'll take you the other 20% of the way there. We love the fact that you're 80% of the way there to start."

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

I think that the community colleges get it, some of the great online universities like WGU get it. I think that the certification groups like ourselves get it. But the people who are not getting it are the high schools and the universities.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:



So what is the employer's role in this? Because we see a lot of apprenticeships or internships, the idea that you can learn skills on the job. Are you partnering with any businesses to give people that real-world experience?

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

Yeah. We're part of the administration. I will give one kudo to the previous administration is they're the ones that started this whole apprenticeship idea. They're the ones that really got engaged around workforce.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

I think they brought some people into the administration who are really passionate about helping to develop some really meaningful and substantial workforce programs. So we've been participating in that. But the challenge that we're finding is that employers still look at that as a burden. They still get up like, "Ugh, I have to train this person?"

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

They have all these open job postings. And sometimes we've seen the number as high as a million, where there's a million open tech jobs. But those employers are only going to hire for those jobs if they find the exact right person. And I always say, the exact right person is already working for somebody else. Unemployment in the tech sector is virtually zero.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

If you were a good professional in any of these areas, you could probably have two jobs if you had the time to do it. So these employers are looking for people who are very specifically configured in terms of their skill sets. I'm not sure when this happened, when companies stopped really investing in their talent. Maybe it came out of the financial crisis where dollars just got tight and people stopped doing that.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

Maybe it became they got too fat and happy on being able to outsource a lot of their work to people. So it was like, well, if we're going to have internal staff, we'll just make sure we get the exact right person because we can always find a contractor to do it. And then we don't have to worry about training.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

I'm not sure what the confluence of events was that caused this lack of desire to train up your existing people. The best pool of people you have for any of your openings are the people you already have. Take someone who's got drive, determination, and has demonstrated a good sense of work ethic, and train them up to take on some of these positions. And then backfill for them and some of these other jobs. But the companies just don't seem to be willing to do that.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

We're seeing some movement there, but it's a big ocean liner that's going to take a long time to turn around. I say that about the universities as well. I think the pain points haven't been powerful enough yet to get people to do that, but it's starting to change.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

And we'll see. This apprenticeship program has been operating for almost two years. The companies that are medium to small, they're embracing it like crazy, but the big companies are not. And part of this too goes back to the college requirements, that they're still wanting to recruit college grads.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

Even the companies who are saying, "Well, we're not requiring it anymore, but we're still preferring it." So how much have you really changed if you're not requiring it but you're still preferring it and you're still hiring these people in?

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

So they're still going to that well as opposed to saying, "How can I connect up with a local community college? How can I work more closely with CompTIA to feed me a steady stream of people who have gone to the time, expense, and effort to get certified for some of these jobs?"

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

We're trying to work with different employers on this as well and it's just really, really challenging. And we see people overspec'ing jobs. So even for entry-level jobs, they're looking for people with five years' experience. That doesn't exist. Those people work for somebody else.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And get paid very well for it.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

Sure. And so you'd have to cherry-pick them away, which isn't the best approach. So I think we're trying to do what we can to create more people into the pipeline. But then eventually, we have to get employers to accept these people. The result has to be a job in the end.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

As we wrap up, I'd like you to address those people out there with the confidence gap, that they don't think they can do it. How do you encourage them? What do you say to them now to go out and find that pathway? What is your advice for them?

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

I think one of the best local resources any people have is their local community college system. And almost every community college system in the country has tech programs.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

Go and do an informational interview with a professor. Go and talk to some of the students that are in those programs, understand their backgrounds, get some of that real-world engagement on those. Try to find some individuals on Facebook or LinkedIn who are in the tech industry and ask them questions.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

You have to do a little bit of this work on your own. And then also, come to our website for resources as well. The idea that you can go and talk to these professors at local community colleges, they'd be more than happy to talk with you about what it takes to really prepare because there are rubber-hits-the-road kind of situations there.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

They have people that are coming from all these diverse backgrounds. So they're maybe in the best position to say, "Look, I've had a ton of students just like you. And they've been successful. They've done well in the programs. And they've gotten jobs and are doing really well."

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

We had a program called IT-Ready which took people with no tech background at all. Some of these people have been out of work for two years. A couple of people had never even turned on a computer. Eight weeks later, they were doing tech support for major companies. So we know that anybody can acquire these skills.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

And I think that's what you can get by interacting with students at the community colleges or some of the professors or administrators of the tech programs within those. And then just start doing your research with us.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

We're going to be developing tons of resources that will give you these kind of career explorations where you can start to say, "Yeah, I could probably do that job. I have some skills. I have this. I can learn stuff. I'm curious. I want to solve problems. I like working in teams. I like technology. I'm excited by it. I want to do good." All these things that get people jazzed about careers today, we just need more of that out there.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

So we're really going to refocus our efforts and redouble our efforts to create a great hub that then can be used by our partners. But you can go and talk to... There's for-profit training companies that prepare people for our certifications or others in the industry. Go talk with them. They'll tell you what it really takes to do this, what kinds of people are successful. It's just a matter of going out and doing the research.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

But if you just buy into the headlines, you're going to be scared. Your confidence gap is going to be big and you're going to think, "It's too expensive. It'll take too long. I don't have the skills. I can't learn this stuff. I'm not good at it." When the truth is, it's not like that.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

Once you get into it, anybody can acquire these. It makes sense. It's logical. But it doesn't require the skills that people think it does. And you won't learn that until you talk to people.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

## WIP Episode 233: Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO

Todd, thank you so much for joining us on the podcast.

Todd Thibodeaux, CompTIA president and CEO:

Thanks for having me.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

My guest today has been Todd Thibodeaux, President and CEO of CompTIA. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, Editor-in-Chief of WorkingNation. Thank you for listening.