

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:

There's a shift in thinking about the path to career success. There's a growing awareness that four-year degrees don't have to be the gold standard, that skills and credentials are just as important, maybe more so for starting or advancing careers. I spoke with Maria Flynn, president and CEO of Jobs For the Future, JFF. She talked about this transformation and about how JFF is spreading the word about non-traditional career pathways.

Maria Flynn, JFF president & CEO:

At JFF, what we're really working on is how do we really broaden the discussion, change the narrative around the different high quality pathways that exist for folks beyond high school. That could include registered apprenticeship, it can include community colleges, it includes industry-recognized credentials, and many options that can be stepping stone to a four-year degree or also stepping stones to great career opportunities and advancement. It's really all about how do we change the mindset in this country around what is success and what is the path to get there.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

One non-traditional path to success is skills-first learning, but not enough students know that's an option.

Maria Flynn, JFF president & CEO:

Four-year institutions like Southern New Hampshire University, they're doing a lot around the competency based model. At the community college level, we're also seeing institutions that are putting credentials first. For example, I know that Dallas Community College District, through work that we've done with them around implementation of the Google IT certificates, is really looking at putting the credential first and building that into a transparent pathway to additional stackable credentials and ultimately degrees. But it really enables folks to learn and earn at the same time, by being able to enter and thrive in the labor market at the same time that they're enhancing their skills and building up for those future opportunities.

Maria Flynn, JFF president & CEO:

I think it's challenging for individuals, whether you are a high school student, whether you are a worker looking to change careers. It's hard to find what opportunities are out there, whether that be education or training opportunities, it's hard to determine how best to finance those opportunities, and then really thinking about how to flourish in those opportunities. If I were to change one thing, it would be really having a much stronger investment in providing timely, transparent, quality information to workers and learners across the country.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Flynn says despite a growing emphasis on credentials and skills, more employers and learning institutions need to appreciate the value of competency over degrees.

Maria Flynn, JFF president & CEO:

On the employer side, by and large, employers see the four-year bachelor's degree as a proxy for career readiness. At JFF, us and a lot of our partner organizations, are doing work on the demand side to help them move more towards skills-based hiring and how to hire based on what someone can do, what they have the skills to do, versus just looking at the degree as the signal. That is getting some great traction. I think there's a lot of work that still needs to be done in order to take that approach to scale.

Maria Flynn, JFF president & CEO:

Part of that is around how they hire, so how are they diversifying the talent pools that they're hiring from, how can they move beyond just using the four-year degree as that proxy for hiring, and also in terms of how they help employees advance both within their company and in the economy and the labor market in general.

Maria Flynn, JFF president & CEO:

We've seen companies over the past two years really start to invest more in their frontline workers. That's something that we did not see much of in the US, say, 10, 15 years ago. That is really changing. I think we're also seeing employers start to shift their mindset. I think you used to see or hear of a mindset where employers didn't want to invest in an employee because they were afraid they would leave. I think we're seeing folks overcome that barrier and really invest in the employee to grow and enhance their skills.

Maria Flynn, JFF president & CEO:

Then on the supply side, it's also working with institutions of higher education, community colleges and four-year institutions, to really look at how can they focus on skills, what would a skills-first approach look like, for example, for community colleges, how can they embrace competency-based education, prior learning assessments, connections to work-based learning opportunities, to really help students come out with a robust array of skills that are needed in the labor market.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Flynn says another positive trend is how employers are increasingly using education as a benefit for their employees.

Maria Flynn, JFF president & CEO:

A lot of them are leveraging the Guild education platform to do that. Guild is working with companies from Walmart, they just signed on Tyson Food, they work with Chipotle, many companies, to provide higher education opportunities through their platform. We're also just seeing more and more employers still using that benefit as a way to increase employee retention at a time that we're experiencing an extremely tight labor market and a lot of war for talent. That is a really interesting, I think, and impactful lever that can be used more and more. I think in terms of federal policy, I think looking to see how we can continue to enhance and build upon these employer investments to really take that to the next level.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

That was Maria Flynn, president and CEO of Jobs For the Future, JFF. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of WorkingNation. Thank you for listening.