

Ramona Schindelheim:

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:

Joining me today on Work in Progress are my colleagues and friends, Art Bilger, founder and CEO of WorkingNation, and Jane Oates, president of WorkingNation. Thank you both for being here.

Jane Oates:

Thank you, Ramona, for having us.

Art Bilger:

Yes. Thank you very much.

Ramona Schindelheim:

In today's podcast I wanted to talk a little bit about our sixth year anniversary, celebrate it because we've really been around doing a lot of work in workforce development, and I'm very proud of that mission that we are on. But I would also like to talk about what challenges are still ahead in the labor market.

Ramona Schindelheim:

Art, why don't we start with you and you tell me a little bit about where you think we are and how far we've come in the last six years.

Art Bilger:

Ramona, thank you very much. I'm delighted to be here with you today. As we look back over the last six years since we launched our WorkingNation in September of '16, I do think we've come a long way. The original mission, I think still the mission today, was to identify where the jobs of the future will be, and I don't mean 20 years from now. I'm talking about today, but also three years from now, five years, seven years from now. And then identifying and then telling the stories about the solutions. And solutions I consider very much to be local. I'm sure plenty of need for government at the highest levels in these areas, but the solutions themselves are local. It's what companies are doing. It's what not-for-profits, academic indies, local government are doing, and identifying those and then telling those stories. But we're a country of 330 million people, and a lot of this information and knowledge, people are not aware of. So the power of media is critical.

Art Bilger:

I do think in the six years since we launched, there has been important advancement in these areas of knowledge and communications. I will say that over the last two-plus years, COVID has accelerated the issues that we face. So what we're doing here at WorkingNation, and there are others out there doing very important stuff, is to work to educate the key audiences across our nation. Audience one are those people who truly can make a difference if they understood. Audience two are those who are working on solutions, because they can learn from each other. Then finally, audience three of mom-and-pops and young people across this country. Because there are many things that the three of us probably know

about and many others out there, but the average family across this country has no knowledge. But with that knowledge, they, I really believe, could move the ball forward aggressively for their families and their communities.

Ramona Schindelheim:

Jane, Art mentioned already COVID. So in the last couple of years, COVID really has impacted the way we work in this country and around the world. What other factors are out there, and how do you see the change? What's changed over the last couple of years?

Jane Oates:

I think the other thing I would add to what Art said is, besides COVID we had the murder of George Floyd in May of 2020, and it all of a sudden made everyone realize that there was gross inequity in every part of our society, but we were focusing on work and opportunities around work. So I think that's become really a mission for everyone, including us, to look at how do we make sure that, as Art said, getting to those stakeholder groups that he was talking about. How do we make sure they have the right information, the information about job titles that they might not be familiar with, the information about a quality program and what makes a program quality to help them get on a pathway.

Jane Oates:

Finally, I would say the word mobility has become much more important. It is no longer just getting you in the door for your first job. It's making sure that every single person has the opportunity to move up the pay scale, the job title scale, and advance themselves. By the way, I think one of the things we have to be really careful of is, it also, it's not just systems changing. People have to put out a hundred percent. People have to take advantage of these opportunities. I think that's something we're hearing right now with this quiet quit stuff. Everybody has to know they still have to work hard, whether they're working remotely or in the same way they worked before COVID.

Ramona Schindelheim:

This focus on equity has become a big part of our conversation here at WorkingNation, rightly so. We did see that there were so many inequities in who has opportunity, as you very clearly said, Jane, opportunities to get a job and then opportunity to advance. One of the underlying bits of conversation that, Art, you like to talk about is how there's a sense of purpose that people get from getting a good family sustaining job.

Art Bilger:

I feel as strong, if not stronger than ever, about the whole idea of the link between employment and purpose in life. Yes, dollars and cents are critical, but I do believe there's much more to employment. I'm not just talking about the three of us and purpose and what we're doing, but I'm talking about employment throughout the society. You get up Monday morning, you go to work. You're part of a team and producing, bringing home income to feed and educate the family to truly be part of a community. Employment is such a critical piece of that sense of wellbeing in society. It is a key part of the message of ours at WorkingNation, the link between employment and purpose in life.

Jane Oates:

I think that purpose piece, I totally agree with Art that all of us derive great purpose from the work that we do and other people, the same way. It doesn't matter what kind of collar you wear, blue, white. No, it doesn't matter. Everyone derives a sense of meaning and purpose from their work. But I think what's really changed in the past several years is that people are choosing employers based on how that employer is showing purpose. So how are they using their corporate social responsibility dollars? What kind of corporate citizen they are. For some people, it's looking at what they do with ESG. You know what I mean? And how they're reducing their own carbon footprint. But for many others is, it's really, "Yes, do you invest in me, but also are you allowing me, as part of my work life, to give back to the community in which we're situated?"

Ramona Schindelheim:

Before George Floyd and before COVID, this was an issue as well. We just didn't see it as a society as clearly, I believe. Do you think that's changed the employer's role or the employer's point of view?

Jane Oates:

So I'll start and let Art back clean up on this one. I think absolutely more employers than ever are looking at the importance of, A, providing a quality job, B, getting workers', both incumbent workers' and prospective workers', input on what quality means. It's hard for me not to think that most people are still worried about salary, because with right now at eight and a half percent inflation rate, everybody's dollar is worth less than it was before. But I think that Art's right when he says it's more than money. It's flexibility. It's, "Are you investing in me?" Those education as benefit kinds of things that we saw pre-COVID that were single digit take-up, I hope in 2022, when we get the data, we're going to find that many more people took advantage of their employer paying tuition for them to up-skill or re-skill themselves.

Ramona Schindelheim:

Earlier you talked about solutions being local. How can a community come together? How can the different pieces come together to collaborate to affect change?

Art Bilger:

As I mentioned earlier, there are key organizations that have very significant reach in local communities. Obviously we've talked a bit here about corporations as employers, but I do believe academic entities, not-for-profits and local government are key parts of that equation. We at WorkingNation are deeply engaged with all of those types of organizations. People can learn quickly, but sometimes the information has to come from elsewhere. And that really is very much our role at WorkingNation.

Art Bilger:

I really believe community is so much of this, and I do think people throughout the country do understand the importance of community. But the employment piece of the equation I do believe has to be a higher priority in the communities in which we live. Whether it's the major cities, including ones that the three of us are sitting in, as well as that small town in Nebraska, lovely family, kids, and all, but there's so much knowledge and information about where the employment world is going that just isn't available to that family. The goal is for WorkingNation, plus many other organizations, to bring that knowledge to them.

Jane Oates:

Ramona, I think the change that is slowly coming and has to come, and I have a sense of urgency about this, is educators and nonprofits have to look at labor market information. They can't train for good jobs that don't exist in that community. Nobody wants to lose their talent. So all those partnerships that Art articulated so carefully and clearly really have to begin and end with labor market information, what are the in demand jobs? And then how can we work together to make sure we get the best possible training so that people are qualified for those jobs that live right next door to us?

Art Bilger:

Picking up on what Jane just said, one of I think the very big issues, which clearly was not an issue I was thinking about nine years ago or six years ago when we launched, but today I do believe is very much a critical issue, is the whole idea of where one works. To what extent are people, is the mechanism of working together changed, the same way the three of us are doing a Zoom right now. Now granted, there's 3000 miles between where Ramona and I live versus where Jane lives, so Zoom is a very valuable thing in that regard. But also I'm seeing quite a bit, we're all seeing quite a bit of a change in how people engage from an employment standpoint.

Art Bilger:

I will tell you, I don't have the answers, but I do worry about this whole idea of virtual employment, because it does seem in a lot of communities to becoming a widely recognized positive thing, which is great. But I do think there are pieces to the equation that are missing, and that is, the three of us can engage very nice on video here, but I don't believe we would all have developed WorkingNation and brought it to where it is today unless we had early on and even ever since then spent a lot of time just sitting in person, face-to-face, brainstorming and developing relationships.

Jane Oates:

Art, that's such a good point, because you hear people, everyone likes the idea of either totally remote working or at least some version of hybrid work. But what does it mean in terms of that relationship? It's not just friendships, but it really is learning and leaning on each other. It's sitting across the table, leaning in and saying, "What a great idea," giving people positive feedback. That doesn't happen nearly enough. I would add one other thing. I don't think managers have the vaguest idea how to manage well with remote workers, and I think eventually it's going to drastically impact productivity.

Art Bilger:

Yeah, I very much agree.

Ramona Schindelheim:

I've often thought about when we had our office before COVID, how easy it was to pop down the hall and get an answer to a question. Now sometimes you have to schedule time, so now you're spending 30 minutes with somebody when it could have taken 30 seconds just to get an answer. So I do think that there is a disadvantage in some jobs, but not everybody has the option to work in an office, and not everybody has the option to work at home. I still think it's a smaller percentage. So I think there's going to be a lot of work still done face-to-face.

Art Bilger:

We got to add to that the different age groups in society. The three of us have worked in person with people directly for decades. But when I look at some of the statistics and conversations with organizations where young people, very important pieces of the equation today and clearly critical pieces, the equation looking forward, there's a very, very different attitude.

Art Bilger:

I was talking recently with a very key partner at a pretty major law firm. I went up to his office to see him, and granted it was a Friday afternoon, but there wasn't a soul on the entire floor except him and I guess his assistant. I did ask him, "Where are all the young attorneys?" And he says, "No one will come to the office." We'll look back 10 years from now and have a much better idea. But if someone asked me to push a particular area of workforce development forward, it would be, let's get back into the office, sit around conference tables and the coffee machine and all. I do think it's something very important, and we really have no real sense of how dramatic it could be for us.

Ramona Schindelheim:

We're nine years into Art's ideas, six years into WorkingNation. The way we work has changed. Technology has changed. There has been a lot of focus also since COVID and George Floyd on the idea that you don't need a college degree anymore to have a really good job. You don't need a college degree to get a really good career. It depends on the job. It depends on the requirements of the job. So the skills based hiring idea has really come to life, and I think that might have also been a result of the last couple of years.

Jane Oates:

I think that the labor market shortage right now is pushing people to adopt things that made sense before COVID. They had the luxury of saying, "In order to do this job, you either have to have a bachelor's degree or an associate's degree, or it's preferred." And many people without the paper are reluctant to apply even if the job description says preferred and not required.

Jane Oates:

I think that when you go to skills based hiring and people can identify the skills that they have and see that they're a direct match for a job, they're much more open to applying. But we still have huge hurdles here because we're talking about things that people could make happen immediately. But right now, the way that hiring is done, it's AI. And if that algorithm hasn't been adjusted to say, "I want to look at people who have the skills who may not have the degree. I want to look at people who have the skills who may have had a pause in their work history. I want to look at people who are older than 60 or younger than 25," those are still things we have a lot of work left to do.

Jane Oates:

I think WorkingNation is uniquely qualified with our partners, and you know our partners at Opportunity@Work are doing some amazing work on this. But our partners at the chamber, our partners at other places, we really need to work together to make sure that more and more employers are paying attention to this. I think your interviews at Sherm that you did earlier this year really reflect that, that we're out there trying to push this message and get people on the record to say, "We understand that talent is more than just a degree."

Ramona Schindelheim:

Skills based hiring, that idea is a very positive idea that came out of two and a half years, very difficult times for people in the workforce, employers and employees. What do you think still needs to be done? What other challenges are out there that have yet to be addressed?

Jane Oates:

Well, look, I think if remote work continues for some, or even hybrid work continues for some, I think you're going to have a lot of pushback from those employees in the same company who have to report every day. I think employers are going to grapple with what kinds of compensation do I give you, Ramona, if you have to come physically to work every day when I'm letting Art work remotely three days a week. So I think that's something to come.

Jane Oates:

I think that the other thing is, this whole push-pull between go to college, don't go to college, we've seen college enrollments drop drastically over the last few years, double digit reductions semester to semester. I really worry that while there are some jobs that require, for licensing purposes or just job descriptions, bachelor's degrees, I'm thinking lawyers, doctors and teachers, nurses, things like that. Are we sending the wrong message to young people? Should we instead be saying, "You can get a great job right out of high school, but you should be looking to stack credentials so that you can get an associate's or a baccalaureate degree."

Jane Oates:

The skills based hiring piece has certainly meant the most for older workers, career changers, people in their twenties, thirties, forties, fifties, who can't go back to school full time. But I think we've got to refine the message in some way, because I don't want to look back in 10 years and say, "Oh my God, all these kids, these low-income kids, we told them not to go to college, and now the next recession doesn't value the skills based hiring the way it did in 2022."

Jane Oates:

So I always want to be looking at, make sure we prepare everyone. We want to give them as many options as possible. I'm very concerned that we're pushing too much in one direction. I want to go on the record though and say, I think skills based hiring responds to a real bias in this country, that you're only smart if you have a degree. That's why I applaud it. But I think we have to really figure out how to figure out a message that's more nuanced.

Ramona Schindelheim:

Art, your thoughts?

Art Bilger:

How could I disagree with Jane?

Jane Oates:

Why start now?

Ramona Schindelheim:

So then, Art, let me ask you this. I'll give you the final question then. Are you optimistic that we are moving forward in addressing the concerns that you had when you first started WorkingNation?

Art Bilger:

Yes, although I do think the challenges are greater than I might have imagined when we first got this thing going, as indicated by some of what we've already talked about, COVID and the acceleration of changes in employment. There's a lot of dialogue going on in this country and beyond this country that is focused on a lot of other issues that, in the end, I do believe impact employment, but not necessarily from a constructive, "Rah-rah-rah, let's go."

Art Bilger:

So, as I mentioned earlier, I do believe there is a lot more discussion than when we first began six years ago. That's great, but there's a lot of learning that still has to happen. I would very much like the subject that we're talking about and the solutions to be elevated much more quickly in this society because of changes that have taken place over the last six years.

Ramona Schindelheim:

Art, Jane, I want to thank you both for being on Work in Progress, and to all of our WorkingNation colleagues out there, happy anniversary.

Jane Oates:

Happy anniversary, Ramona. Thanks.

Art Bilger:

Yeah. Thank you so much, Ramona. Thanks for all that you do.

Ramona Schindelheim:

And thank the both of you.

Ramona Schindelheim:

I've been speaking to Art Bilger, founder and CEO of WorkingNation and Jane Oates, president of WorkingNation. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of WorkingNation. Thank you for listening.