

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. Joining me today on the Work in Progress podcast is Maureen Conway, vice President at the Aspen Institute and executive director of the Institute's Economic Opportunities Program. Maureen, good to talk to you.

Maureen Conway, Aspen Institute Vice President:

Great to be with you. Ramona.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I always like to start out by getting a little primer for the people who may not know what you do, what your program does. So tell me what you're focused on.

Maureen Conway, Aspen Institute Vice President:

At the Economic Opportunities Program, we're focused on policies, strategies, ideas that help people all across the United States build better livelihoods and better lives. And the two primary areas we focus on are how do people do that in the context of the labor market and getting good jobs, and also how do people do that in the context of starting their own business and participating in business ownership. So we look at both of those strategies.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

We love talking about entrepreneurship. I'll get to that a little bit later, but let's talk about how people can expand their own opportunities. And it's not just on their own, it's got to be a collaboration. I mean that's pretty much how we've discussed it in the past, of employers and non-profits. How can everybody get together to level that playing field?

Maureen Conway, Aspen Institute Vice President:

Well, let me maybe take a step back in terms of what we see as sort of an aspiration for the outcomes. So I think that for the most part, when I'm talking to businesses, workers, people in government, regardless of their political stance, philanthropy. For the most part, everybody wants to see more people to have good jobs. So I rarely talk to a business that says, "Oh, I really want to create bad jobs for my people." That is not what they're looking to do. But sometimes we need sort of a clearer understanding of what is it that we actually mean when we say a good job. And we did some work earlier this year with the families and workers fund to sort of build a shared definition of a good job. This really built on work that many people, us and many others, have done in terms of building frameworks of what is job quality or a good job mean in the particular context in which they work.

We did focus groups of business, we did focus groups of workers. We sort of had a whole multi-stakeholder input process. And I think what we see sort of common to all of these frameworks is these basic three pillars of a good job. A good job should provide basic wages and benefits, give you a stable standard of living. They should provide opportunity to grow. So opportunity to learn new skills, opportunity to advance, opportunity to build wealth, sort of this idea of opportunity for more should you choose to pursue it was also important to people.

And then the third pillar is this idea of equity, dignity, and respect. And sort of building workplace in which your access to the job or your access to advancement is not contingent on your race, your gender, your orientation, your ability status, your religion, any of those kinds of things. So none of that. And that you know are respected in your workplace and that means that your ideas and are listened to taken into account. And there's a way of building mutual trust and mutual systems of accountability. Those are things in different words and in different ways we've been hearing for decades from both workers really and businesses, that this kind of makes sense to them.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Let me ask then, how do most American jobs stack up against those three pillars?

Maureen Conway, Aspen Institute Vice President:

The reality is a little bit far from the aspiration. Gallup did a survey of working people and found that only 44% of people said that they had a good job based on the things that were important to them. We know that too many jobs really don't provide that basic wages and benefits that do provide that stable livelihood. So Brookings Institution found that, I think it was 53 million working adults were in jobs with low hourly wages. And so this is a not insignificant number of people. It was about a third of the workforce that is in these jobs.

We know that there's a lot of contributing factors for this. We know that the economy has changed, technology has changed, the mix between production and service has changed. We have fewer unions. We have, the ways that labor market is regulated has changed. There's lots of things that have been pushing and you can pick whichever one you want. And in some ways I feel like it does matter in terms of understanding where we've been to help us understand where we need to go. But it also is not that productive to try to just pick a villain, because I think really we need everybody, to your original point, we need everybody kind of figuring out what's their role to getting towards this shared aspiration of people being able to be productively employed in good jobs.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

The idea though that good jobs, the definition to people, to workers themselves and to your point employers, they want to provide good jobs as well. That's been going on for a while though. That kind of definition has been there a while. Is technology changing too quickly? We're just not keeping up? I know you mentioned some other factors from the switch from maybe more production labor to knowledge work, but why aren't we keeping up? Do you have an answer for that? I mean, I don't know think I've ever asked that question of anyone.

Maureen Conway, Aspen Institute Vice President:

And I'm not sure I can give a perfect answer to this. I think there's a couple of things that I think about in terms of what widening inequality has meant for people's understanding of each other's reality. I think when I talk to business leaders, sometimes their understanding of what it means to live on a certain wage level doesn't really match the reality of that. Some of them are older and it's been a while since... We have all this talk of inflation these days, but we've had inflation and people don't do inflation adjustments in their head. So people aren't really cognizant of the fact that when I first had my minimum wage job, a while ago we'll just say. It's been a while. If you adjusted that for inflation, it would be a little over \$11 an hour now. And our minimum wage is still stuck at 7.25.

So you hear about people like, "Oh no, I have to raise wages to \$11, \$12 an hour." And you think, my goodness, with all the economic growth since I had my minimum wage job, which was not the height of the value of the minimum wage by the way, which was in 1968, mine came well after that. Wages, we've had a very long period of this stagnation of wages at the lower part of the labor market. Just got a lot of ground to make up there. So that is something that I think, because it's been the sort of frog slowly cooking in the pot kind of a thing, I think people just don't really realize how difficult it's gotten.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

That makes me think, I just saw in the news, I think it was within the last month, month and a half, despite the ups and downs in the housing market, most people today do not make enough money to buy a home. And I think back when my dad, I was a kid and my dad bought a house for the family, I think... I was growing up in the Midwest, it was like \$16,000. I live in Los Angeles now. There it's impossible almost to find anything under \$500,000 in the city and the surrounding suburbs now. So you wonder how can anyone be able to afford that? And so that information is available to employers. How do you get them to act on it? Again, impossible questions to answer in a single sentence, but I guess I'm trying to get at how do we chip away at it maybe?

Maureen Conway, Aspen Institute Vice President:

I think there's a lot of different pieces to this. And I think one of the important things is to reframe our goals. So if we want more people to be in good jobs. Rather than evaluating the people, maybe we should evaluate the jobs. And so when we think about what does it mean for a job to be a good job? What are the right benchmarks we use to assess that job and how do we think about, how we encourage the kinds of business models and the kinds of competitive strategies that lead towards better jobs rather than worse jobs? And just to say, because again, we've been having these conversations for a while about how good jobs are good business and they certainly can be, right?

But there are different business strategies. So you can have a winning business strategy with good jobs and you can have a really good and sustainable long-term business strategy with good jobs, but you can short-term make a lot of money by having crummy jobs. And so there are these dynamics where we sort of say, well, we'll just let this play out. That can sometimes unwittingly I think not really put the thumb on the scale for companies that are creating good jobs and competing on that strategy in the way that maybe we actually would all like to see.

I'll give you a couple of policy examples of this. So we have this policy narrative about we want to encourage everybody to work, but the way we encourage everybody to work is by subsidizing work. And so I think an alternative way that people maybe feel differently about, but we could say, how could public jobs be good jobs and how could the public sector make sure everybody has a job who wants a job, so that we encourage work, but we also sustain the high standards for work and we encourage competition. And this is what we were trying to think about in our recent look at how at public purchasing as well, is how can the public sector encourage work but also encourage competition, sort of like a race to the top in terms of job quality instead of a race to the bottom in terms of job quality?

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So explain a little bit more about that conversation you had in December about how the government, how they procured their contracts and who they hire to perform them.

Maureen Conway, Aspen Institute Vice President:

So government procurement, so first of all, government procurement, huge. Trillions. I think we looked at the federal, state, and local and you added all up, it's an estimated \$2.1 trillion. It's a lot of money. This is a big market mover. And also in the history of government procurement, there is history of trying to achieve social goals as well. So we can think about trying to create opportunities for small businesses, trying to create opportunities for women-owned businesses, for minority-owned businesses, for business people coming from disadvantaged backgrounds who might not have had sort of the leg up in the system. How do we create openings for them? So we have a history of trying to advance certain social goals within the context of procurement.

The argument that we were making, I was making with Mark Popovich in a paper we put out recently was that we should think about job quality. 80% of households support themselves on wage and salary earnings. And then the other households are retired and are living off of their previous wage and salary earnings essentially. I mean wage and salary earnings are how people support themselves. Most of us, we count on that paycheck. So this is hugely important for jobs to be good jobs. It's hugely important to achieve some of the rhetoric that we hear about not wanting people to be dependent on government benefits and those kinds of things. They can't not depend on government benefits unless they can get good jobs. So we need to encourage jobs to be good. So the idea was basically to say, why don't we sort of take that into account in our procurement systems? So why don't you ask companies some basic things about pay, about equity, because equity is really important, and equity isn't just for ownership, it's also for employment.

Ask them about pay, ask them about equity, ask them about internal advancement and turnover. And those are some good indicators of job quality and they're not that hard to measure. And you can start to get a sense across companies, who's competing on a employee engagement, high productivity, that kind of model versus a low cost, high turnover sort of model? And in many ways you do get a better service if you have a more stable workforce that's better trained and more productive. So how do we start to put the thumb on the scale towards the high job quality and high quality in general, rather than a narrow focus on low cost? This is particularly true I think for a government context, where there's a bit of pay me now, pay me later. Because if the government supports companies that are creating jobs where half the workforce is getting the earned income tax credit, they're still eligible for food stamps, they're still paying, it's just coming out of a different pocket.

So you might as well try to get it on the front end. And I remember talking to a lot of people in the welfare to work days, and the vast majority of women that I talked to, that's not a fun experience. There were some for whom it had been a intergenerational experience of living on welfare. And so there was more fear because it was more unknown. But for so many, they'd had the experience of being disrespected in terms of what happens at your welfare office and how that system works, as well as to the degree they'd been in and out of jobs, disrespected at work too. And really trying to get into something where they've had more respect and more agency and control over their lives was really just so important and valuable to them. All of those stories really stick with me and that's why I feel so passionate about this issue.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And that goes to your third pillar of what a good job is. That sense of purpose, that sense of respect, dignity. I think it's important to a lot of people, just in general, but having that in the workplace I think gives you a certain additional pride.

Maureen Conway, Aspen Institute Vice President:

Absolutely. It's hard to feel respected in the workplace if you're not paid sufficiently to sort of keep it a stable life. And if you're not included, not included in the sense of oh come over and have dinner or whatever, but included in the sense of this is what this organization is about and this is why you're, how your job fits and why it's important in how we run our organization. And people really want to feel that their work is not just a paycheck, but also it was a contribution to something.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And also that sense and doubling down on what you said earlier too, which is that sense that there is opportunity, therefore advancement if you want it, and that you are being thought of in those terms and you're not just, as you said, just doing a job, filling a spot, but what you can contribute can move you up if that is what you choose in that company. So before we go, because we have a few more minutes here, I would love to turn to that idea of starting your own business, which is something that does increase people's opportunities for advancement. I just did a series on how entrepreneurship is a pathway to social and economic mobility. So what are you finding in your research? Is this something a lot of people are thinking about doing? Or is there things that we need to do to encourage it? Because we do know it can work.

Maureen Conway, Aspen Institute Vice President:

It certainly can work. I would say there are many people who are interested in it. It's not necessarily for everyone. So one thing I want to say is I think there's lots of things we can do and invest in to expand opportunities for people to start their own business. I think it's also important to situate that in context. I always say this about every single solution, it's not the singular solution, it's a contributor. A country where everybody runs their own business, most of those countries are not very wealthy countries. So because we build wealth by building businesses where people can sort of specialize and that sort of thing. So that has been how countries build wealth is having businesses that are large businesses as well as small businesses. But it's important to make sure the opportunities to start a business and run a business are equitably available and that people for whom that is what they want to do, can do it.

There's lots of things we can do to improve access to capital and credit for people to start businesses. There's lots of things we can do to provide better technical assistance. We're doing some work now with community development, finance institutions in our shared success project to think about how they can build some job quality business advising into their business advising strategies. So as businesses stabilize and grow, they're also thinking about how do we build the workforce that's going to stick with us and going and going to contribute to our success and we'll be able to have our talent pipeline that grows with us. Kind of a little new for a lot of organizations that work with small businesses. And so that's been really interesting to work with a bunch of partners on that. So I think there's a connection between these job strategies and business ownership.

The other thing we've been looking at is various forms of employee ownership. Ownership of business assets, like I was saying about wealth, business assets is where a lot of the country's wealth is, but right now business assets are very highly concentrated. And if we want to get at racial and gender wealth gaps and the incredible wealth disparities in general, figuring out how we broaden access to ownership of business assets is really important. And so both opportunities for people to start and run their own businesses and opportunities to sort of have shared ownership, I think are both really important contributors to addressing the incredible wealth gaps that we have.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I know we have a long way to go, but do you think we're making progress?

Maureen Conway, Aspen Institute Vice President:

I have to believe we're making progress. But I do believe we're making progress. I think, with Steve Dawson, we did this paper back in, I want to say it was in 2014, where we put out our raise the floor and build ladders paper. I think within the workforce world that got a lot of attention with people thinking about that. We've had this long narrative of very individualistic, give somebody the skills, help them individually climb. And I think we were really challenging to say, yes, individual solutions, but also systemic solutions. Because we need both systemic and individual solutions if we're going to raise the floor and build a system in which more people can thrive, rather than having a system in which few people can thrive and then people are sort of fiercely falling into factions because there's just too few viable opportunities.

But I think that since that time I've seen more and more organizations really innovating in this space, in the sort of good jobs, job quality space in a variety of ways. Even if we haven't figured out the perfect solutions, if we're starting to make that narrative shift and we're starting to look a little bit differently at what does the solution look like? What's the purpose of a partnership with a variety of different actors? That's the way we start to find our way forward and make progress on this important challenge.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

In your view, what would be a good way to measure progress? How can we make it more transparent that we are achieving the goals that we want to achieve?

Maureen Conway, Aspen Institute Vice President:

I can think we're making progress, but what we really do need to do is find shared metrics and shared standards by which we can all assess whether in fact we are making progress. A number of organizations have really been thinking about different kinds of job quality measures. We've done work on that. The Good Jobs Institute has done work on that. The Families and Workers fund recently did a report of its job quality measurement initiative that looked at a variety of different kinds of measures for different kinds of contacts. I think this is an area where we're just starting to make progress in terms of building shared metrics. But I'm very excited about it and I'm excited about the energy in this field. I think embedding these new metrics in program practice, in public policy, in business practice, in philanthropic efforts, that is going to be the key to us being able to move forward.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Maureen, thank you very much. I appreciate it. Very insightful. I appreciate your time.

Maureen Conway, Aspen Institute Vice President:

Thank you, Ramona. This was super fun.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I've been speaking with Maureen Conway, VP at the Aspen Institute and executive director of the Institute's Economic Opportunities Program. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-Chief of WorkingNation. Thank you for listening.