

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You're listening to Work In Progress. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of Working Nation. Work in Progress explores the rapidly changing workplace through conversations with innovators, educators, and decision makers, people with solutions to today's workforce challenges.

Advances in artificial intelligence are moving faster than our ability to comprehend their implications. Will these technologies enable inclusion and accessed opportunity for workers and communities, or will they increase inequity? Vilas Dhar is the President of the Patrick J. McGovern Foundation, a one-and-a-half billion dollar philanthropy advancing AI and data solutions to create a thriving, equitable, and sustainable future for all. Vilas and I sat down at the Changemaker Forum, part of the Global Inclusive Growth Summit in DC, to discuss the potential impact of AI and the much talked about ChatGPT. Here is that conversation.

Vilas, thank you for joining me on the Work in Progress podcast. I really appreciate it. One of the things that we have been talking about is the impact of AI and machine learning and now ChatGPT, which everybody's talking about on the workforce. We just sat through this Aspen Global Inclusive Growth Summit. You were talking about how you felt we needed to think about this and the impact on workers and people. Give me your general thoughts on that.

Vilas Dhar, The Patrick J. McGovern Foundation:

I think we should take a step back from AI and all the emotions that creates and all of the assumptions we have, and instead ask a different question. If we were to face a transformation of what it means to be a productive worker, somebody who finds a job where they both contribute and feel fulfilled, and then find something that so fundamentally transforms that, what would we do? Where would we start? What would the questions be? Now we face a moment where that abstraction is becoming real. AI could potentially transform every job on the planet.

Before we think about what AI is or how it will do so, we have to center ourselves in the fact that we need to build a future where every person has dignity in their work. AI might come in and take some of the skills that are necessary to succeed in today's world and make them obsolete. It may come in and create new pathways for humans to be productive, to be creative. We can talk about these things in more detail, but if we don't start from a question of what's the dignified outcome we're solving for, it's too easy to get lost in the details.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

That is going to bring up the idea, though, just like the Industrial Revolution or the Bronze Age, all the different ages that we have gone through, things change. Do you think this is more disruptive than past?

Vilas Dhar, The Patrick J. McGovern Foundation:

I can't tell you whether it'll be more or less disruptive, but what I can tell you is that it will change very fundamental assumptions. I'll give you an example. We built an entire system in white collar work particularly, and to take the example of legal practitioners, where we've established a pathway. The pathway is you go through formal education. You go through specialized training. You go through an informal apprenticeship. At some point, your time is valued by the hour. That becomes the unit of measure. These tools are fundamentally changing what lawyers might do with an hour of their time. It strips away some of the need for basic research, for writing briefs, for doing some of these tactical things that take time and are the expression of human wisdom that a person has gathered through their

career journey. When that happens, how do we value that person's work? If it takes them 10 minutes to do what used to take an hour, do we only compensate them for 10 minutes of work?

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I think that's a great thing to think about because we talk about the knowledge-based workforce. That is going to be the one that is probably most impacted by this. But it could also change the way we do more physical jobs as well.

Vilas Dhar, The Patrick J. McGovern Foundation:

Yeah. I want to expand that question. I do think the challenge in front of us is that this black box of AI, which will include inside of it generative AI, which is in the news every day now, but also predictive AI and machine learning, all of these new tools that are being created will affect every job on the planet. If you are a worker in a factory, it's possible that automation might come in and change the production line. If you're in a patient care setting as a clinician, it's possible that AI will fundamentally change the ways that you deliver medical care, and certainly in the knowledge-based economy.

The question that I start from is who's going to feel the effects first, and who's going to feel them in ways that are disproportionate? I'm worried about rural workers. I'm worried about agricultural workers. I'm worried about jobs that have always been risky, that have asked people to put themselves in places of vulnerability, a physical danger that can better be done by a robot. But often, those jobs are also occupied by people who have been left out of political process and not had great political voice. So my question starts from, if we are going to begin changing jobs, how do we make sure that every worker has a voice in what that transformation looks like?

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Do you think that the ... I'm going to use a term that we've heard it before, have and have-nots. Those that have are probably going to benefit more than the have-nots, then?

Vilas Dhar, The Patrick J. McGovern Foundation:

I'm looking at the world today. I'm seeing that AI is currently owned by a small set of technology companies. They're selling it to employers and manufacturers and industries across the planet. I am concerned that workers' voices are not really represented in how these tools are being built or how they're being deployed. What's the logical conclusion of that? Well, we could envision a world where if nobody did anything, the holders of capital and the people who own stock and tech companies end up benefiting in amazing ways with massive economic productivity, even as those who are displaced are totally left out of that.

But I'm an optimist. When I say "if nobody did anything," obviously, for me, the answer is, "If we all did something, we could actually steer towards a very different world, one where there's an economic cornucopia productivity, where every job category is made more efficient, which means it's safer for the people who work in them, which means that they have support and augmentation to deal with difficult situations, where humans are allowed to do what we think of as human work, the pieces that require creativity and connection, the pieces that require innovative thinking and the ability to respond to novel problems." That's a better world, especially when workers are also allowed to participate in the economics of that transformation. So I ask questions like, "What would it look like for companies to involve cooperatives of workers in the transformation of their jobs, to actually ask them, 'How can AI help you do your job better?' Instead of telling them that 'AI is going to do your job for you?'"

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Do you think that it's going to shift how we do our jobs, but it's not necessarily going to wipe us all out? Robots are not going to take all of our jobs at this point?

Vilas Dhar, The Patrick J. McGovern Foundation:

Yeah. I rarely speak in absolutes. Can I see a world where every farming and industrial job in America is replaced by a machine? I could see that happening, but that doesn't mean that's the only option. It just means that might be the easiest one if we only look at the short term. What I'd love to see is a world where people who are doing those kinds of jobs are able to move into higher value contributions, where machines are doing the things that, again, are this dirty, sticky, dangerous work, but humans are involved because any number of these jobs still require a novel insight that only humans can provide. Getting there is going to require a new way of thinking about labor, a new way of thinking about training and skilling, and a new compact between employers and employees about where value is created and how it's shared.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

One of the things that came up in the conversation today was, "Who is going to police this?"

Vilas Dhar, The Patrick J. McGovern Foundation:

Yep.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

There's already been a couple of cases where two people were wrongly accused of something, one, a mayor, one, a professor, because this ChatGPT in particular scraped the internet. Who's going to take a look at this? Does the government need to get involved, or do we as society need to get involved?

Vilas Dhar, The Patrick J. McGovern Foundation:

We go back to the question from the top of this conversation, which is, what's the society we're designing for? Let's take a very specific example. Let's think about a teacher in a seventh or eighth grade classroom. We're already seeing impacts on how that teacher interacts with their students because of ChatGPT. As you might expect, the very first response to a new tool came out of a very human emotion. It was school systems that tried to ban it and say, "This is not okay that we're using this in the classroom." Teachers were worried that students would use it to cheat, all of these things that happened. But very quickly, in just a period of a few months, the conversation changed. It became one about how teachers could use ChatGPT to more effectively teach in the classroom. That's a great example for me of how we're going to have to go through a very fast evolution of how we think about the harms of technologies.

It means that the ways that we interact with them and protect ourselves from their worst possible outcomes is to rely on the knowledge of the people who do the jobs. A regulator will never be able to come in and say, "Do or don't use ChatGPT in the classroom," without hearing from the experience of teachers who are engaging with it and are finding that actually using ChatGPT to be a questioner for a student, a tutor, effectively, can be a really amazing way to bring them forward in their academic journey. In every job category, we're going to need to find ways to incorporate people who have lived experience in the role, regulators who are thinking about broad societal issues, and the humanists, the sociologists, and the anthropologists, and the people out there who are doing things like working in

labor unions, who understand what systemic effects might look like, to come in and regulate all of this together.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

The last idea is bringing a collective together. It can't just be government. It can't just be educators, business leaders, or nonprofits. Everybody has to get together and figure out, "What do we do next for the betterment of people?"

Vilas Dhar, The Patrick J. McGovern Foundation:

I think that's right. What I think it requires more than anything else is for every human being on this planet to feel and own their agency to have a point of view. This is no longer a conversation between tech companies and regulators about how a technology will be used. It's a conversation that every one of us have to find our voice in, to spend the time to learn what the issues are, to feel and know how they might affect our lives, and to advocate for ourselves, for our communities, for our sectors, to say, "There is a way that we can build a better, more productive economy together." But there's no way it'll happen until every single person out there feels like they can be a part of the conversation. That's our shared responsibility.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Thank you very much.

Vilas Dhar, The Patrick J. McGovern Foundation:

Thank you. It's been a delight.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

That was my conversation with Vilas Dhar, president of the Patrick J. McGovern Foundation at the 2023 Global Inclusive Growth Summit. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of Working Nation. Thanks for listening.