

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.

At Working Nation, we talk about the unequal access to opportunity and prosperity in the US. One group that has lagged far behind is Native Americans, which have experienced chronic unemployment and brain drain from tribal lands. But there's a new initiative that's focused on turning that around. Last month I attended the annual ASU+GSV Summit. It's a gathering of leaders to share ideas on transforming society and business around learning and work. And there I spoke with Moroni Benally, a member of the Navajo Nation and Head of Public Policy and Partnerships at Aspire Ability. And Amber Garrison Duncan, Executive Vice President of C-BEN. They shared a new venture for promoting economic mobility called the Navajo Nation Talent Marketplace. I started out by asking Moroni to describe this venture.

So you guys just have come out with a new initiative, a talent marketplace for the Navajo Nation. Explain to me what that means.

Moroni Benally, Aspire Ability head of public policy and partnerships and member of Navajo Nation:

At least for the Navajo Nation, I think in a word, well, the Navajo word that they've been using is *chaaná*, which means resilience and full of hope. And so in my mind, that's the first thing that pops in my mind, at least from the Navajo Nation. That's what that represents. But in practice, it's at least for Indian country, at least for the Navajo Nation, the talent marketplace has first identified a functioning labor market. For the first time, they have data. We have now have data on the jobs market in the Navajo Nation, which wasn't there before.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

That's incredible because I do know that ... I mean, I look at the labor numbers. I'm a little bit of a Labor Department nerd, and I have never seen that before.

Moroni Benally, Aspire Ability head of public policy and partnerships and member of Navajo Nation:

Right. And that's a necessary step for the whole talent marketplace, is understanding what jobs are out there in the Navajo Nation already, because we hear a lot of these entrenched tropes of Indian country, of high unemployment which it's true, but part of those high employment numbers. And I think also part of why there's this stereotype, this myth that there are no jobs in Indian country, in part because no one has put forth the effort to actually identify the jobs. And so up to about a year ago, we were operating under the assumption that the Navajo Nation was only creating about a 100 to 200 jobs a year, which is based on data that we could find. But based on what we've done is we found 2,100 available vacant jobs in the private sector in the Navajo Nation. There's another 2,000 that are in the public sector, government jobs.

And so what we're finding is that there are jobs available, but it gets back to this talent marketplace of this broken job market. [inaudible 00:03:22] I'm now knowing everyone's trying to do this in different ways is connecting the learners to the education institutions and then connecting them to the employers.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I do know about Diné College and how they work with Arizona State University. There's a water quality program, and we've written about that one, and I thought that was a very interesting insight into what was going on there that I didn't know about. So tell me how you guys are working with the other educational institutions and with the nation.

Amber Garrison Duncan, C-BEN executive VP:

Yeah. Our view is to start with, since the focus of the project is to make sure people know that there are jobs at home, to know that there is quality education available on the reservation. A lot of times what we were hearing is that people thought they had to leave the reservation to find education and work. And as we are talking with education providers, employers trying to say, "We want our people to know there are quality things happening here at home." But the first thing that happened when we took the job board to the colleges was they were like, "Oh my goodness, thank you." Because they knew that they were going to be open jobs, but they did not know how to prepare people for what jobs were out there because again, it wasn't clear what those jobs were. So the first thing we're doing is working with the colleges to bring the job board to them, to bring those discreet knowledge, skills, abilities, things that people will have to know and be able to do to perform those jobs and just realigning the curriculum.

But what I will tell you is everything we've seen so far is that the quality of what is happening is high quality. It's also done in a culturally relevant way for Navajo. The Indigenous ways of knowing and doing are highly honored. And so it really is complimentary to CBE because an Indigenous ways of learning is not all about doing, and it's all about getting out and trying and practicing and getting feedback. And so the model is highly complimentary to the competency-based education model. And so we're partnering with the colleges to again, take those competency skill set, make sure the curriculum are aligned, and then working with the career advisors and the navigators to help the connect them right back to the open jobs so that people can stay at home and find meaningful work on the reservation. And that restorative process, I would love for you to be able to talk about, because I think it certainly moves me and the reason why I work, but why is that so meaningful for folks?

Moroni Benally, Aspire Ability head of public policy and partnerships and member of Navajo Nation:

So this telemarketplace is one, just an incredible innovation in the Navajo Nation, but in Indian country as well. And what it gets back to what Amber was talking about was, so I grew up on the Navajo Nation and did all these things and grew up with electricity, running water, all of that. And we were constantly told when we were young by our elders *nahaadiidaa* which means you go away, but you come back and return and bring all of these things that the holy people have blessed you with to bring now to bless us. So it was like come back and return. And so I went to Stanford, got all this education, thought I'd easily get in there and I could not get a job in the Navajo Nation, not in the government because of these qualifications.

I think, I remember one time I applied for this job and I didn't fully have all the skills to operate the Microsoft Suite. I had all the other competencies, but that was the one that I didn't have. And therefore I did not qualify for the job with the Navajo Nation because I missed that. I'm like, oh, I've got this degree from Stanford and economics and all this stuff, but yet I don't know how to operate PowerPoint. So that was really troubling. It's just like, how do I come back and return when there's nothing to return home to? And so part of what Amber was talking about is, so what Aspire Ability has done is they're being guided by this indigenous Navajo framework called *Hozhoogoo Naa'adaa* meaning a return to goodness, resilience, harmony and balance. So we're thinking about that in this very holistic way with

Aspire Ability. And one of those dimensions of that harmony and balance is what they call **Nihigaał** or they call it this holy movement for you to sustain yourself and sustain your community.

But we don't have any training on how they can sustain themselves or jobs to get them into sustaining themselves. And so Aspire Ability is coming in with C-BEN and saying, how can we fix this? And that talent marketplace at least represents a return back to that state of allowing people to come home and fulfill that mandate of **nahaadiidaal**, of come back and bring your goodness, because that even now is broken in the Navajo Nation. These are the ideas and thoughts that I have and it's shared with a lot of folks in the Navajo Nation as well.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You brought a point earlier that we didn't know these jobs existed. So what jobs do exist? Because I think obviously that's going to be the catalyst for what kind of education and training's going to happen.

Moroni Benally, Aspire Ability head of public policy and partnerships and member of Navajo Nation:

Right. There are two parts to that question, and it gets to what jobs exist is that with most rural areas and with reservations in particular because they're so constrained by federal rules and regulations, that even simple access to land to access capital becomes a seven year challenge. And as a result of that, a lot of the jobs are funded by federal grant programs. So the Navajo Nation's annual budget's like 1.6 billion, about 70% of that comes from federal grant programs. And so that then tends to drive a lot of the jobs. So there's healthcare jobs, there's public housing jobs, construction jobs, and a lot of education. And part of the context that tribes are in is that the federal constraints have severely limited the activity of the private sector to create different types of markets, to bring in different types of jobs.

And so part of what Aspire Ability is doing, and this is what I think is part of the unique part with this, is that Aspire Ability recognized an opportunity when the Navajo Nation received several billion in ARPA money during COVID, and they've allocated about 500 million of that through broadband to expand broadband across the Navajo Nation. And we thought, well, why can't we attach ourselves to that and bring remote jobs into the Navajo Nation to leapfrog over all of those federal constraints because they already have the clearances, they've already done all they need to do to expand broadband. And while they're doing that, we give them these remote jobs and train them to do that.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And have you taken that step already? Has that broadband come in already?

Moroni Benally, Aspire Ability head of public policy and partnerships and member of Navajo Nation:

Yeah. Yeah. So right now the broadband is expanding it. It's being pushed out across the Navajo Nation, and they're expecting to have all of that completed in the next several years, two to three years.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And now that you know about this expansion and you know what kind of jobs are there, what do you do, Amber?

Amber Garrison Duncan, C-BEN executive VP:

In the remote jobs, a lot of those are leaning on cybersecurity type of jobs. Even hearing from the tribal entities themselves, like the tribal utility, they need cybersecurity. So that's a nice place to provide lots

of training when you've got jobs on the res and jobs that can be brought in that are remote. There's also opportunities to think about Salesforce and Google and AWS, all of those components of now I can live at home and perform those jobs.

So that's where our step is to take, again, those job descriptions, break them down into different bite size of competencies and skills, but it also opens the door for online learning. Navajo is huge and as a reservation, it's the largest reservation in the country, and individuals are spread out all over. They will drive two hours to go to school. So now having broadband access and being able to maybe do some of this online in hybrid and maybe tap into some of the chapters, which is kind of how Navajo breaks down their counties, we'll be able to provide using a competency-based model, more flexible, accessible way for Navajos to get training through the entities on Navajo through Diné, through Navajo Tech using a competency-based model.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Did you want to add something to that?

Moroni Benally, Aspire Ability head of public policy and partnerships and member of Navajo Nation:

Just to that point, last week, we secured our very first employer in the Navajo Nation, which is the housing authority, and they've got couple hundred million dollars in ARPA funds that they need to spend to build houses across the Navajo Nation. And so this is our first employer that Aspire Ability have been working with and with the colleges.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Now you say they have to build houses, so trade skills?

Amber Garrison Duncan, C-BEN executive VP:

Definitely in construction, carpentry, a lot of the trades. So what's interesting is Navajo Nation has been thoughtful of Navajo Tech University and Diné University. Navajo Tech tends to cover some of the more, again, technical all the way up to, it's a research university. So as you can imagine, what's nice is we can get somebody on a path with a certificate or an industry certification and then continue on learning onto their associate's degree, their bachelor's degree. They could do that all in one place. So that's also something we'll make sure those pathways are built all the way up. Certainly those on-ramps are in the trades, again, around construction, home building, general contracting, welding obviously is a big piece. So thinking about all of those training components.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And on healthcare, are there res-based facilities that people could work at?

Amber Garrison Duncan, C-BEN executive VP:

Yes, definitely. To me, the healthcare and their early childcare really is similar on Navajo as it is in most of the states we're working in, is that there's a real worker shortage in early childcare education, daycare centers, things like that. Also in their healthcare around nursing and having those pathways into job. But there are jobs, there's hospitals, childcare facilities. One thing I love about visiting Navajo is in education, we talk a lot about there's no childcare centers on campus. That's one of the first buildings you see when you get to Navajo Tech is childcare center. And so being able to help uplift and train

Navajo who are working in those two fields in particular is a high need. And so we'll be able to help support that.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And Moroni, I want to ask you, when you talk about this return, this spirit of returning and creating that on the reservation, do you hope that people will stay and build those out? Is this a way to create more financial stability there?

Moroni Benally, Aspire Ability head of public policy and partnerships and member of Navajo Nation:

Oh, absolutely. How I came to Aspire Ability, so I was still finishing my dissertation, but I was teaching at a college, public policy, and I'd been working and just handling policy for tribes for a number of years. So I'm finishing my PhD sometime, I don't know when. I've been dissertating for a couple of years. So the founder, so the CEO, John Mott was my professor at BYU about 20 some odd years ago. I was in his masters of public policy. So that's how we got to know each other. And over the years, we just kept in touch. And about five years ago, it was like two years, maybe two or three years before the pandemic, he had approached me with this idea. And so we talked about the possibility of how the idea at the time could impact the Navajo Nation and having grown up in ...

So I'm also the government affairs representative to the state of Utah for the Navajo Nation. So I handle the whole legislative portfolio. And so when I hear these ideas of people coming and saying, "Hey, we have this idea that's going to save the Navajo Nation." And I look at that and I'm like, "Okay, one, do you have the necessary capital? And will to nurture this relationship for 18 months before you see anything? Two, are you doing this to simply, and nothing bad about this, but simply just to get your own personal gain out of it, or is there something that you're going to leave behind that will build the community, that will actually shift and change the institutional framework of the Navajo nation?" And when I saw that, I'm like, this is a game changer. When we talk about nation building, we talk about institutions that keep development stagnant. This talent marketplace pushes on those policies and forces them to change.

And so we're already seeing that right now in the Navajo Nation, and part of what we're doing, they're reevaluating how they do their qualifications just for the jobs in the Navajo Nation, an internal policy shift. So there's conversations about that already happening, and then we're working with the tribal council and they're trying to rebuild and shift institutions so that this program can be successful. So for me, when I look at that, when that idea came, I immediately saw these long-term institutional changes that are requisite for the Navajo Nation to not only shift out of heavily based government jobs, but to diversify the types of jobs available. But more than that, but also to give an opportunity for our people to have a thriving living wage and also to bring our people home.

So there are about 170,000 Navajos that live in the reservation, but there are 400,000 total. So three quarters of us live off the Navajo Nation because they're under impression that there are no opportunities for them there. So my example, I left and I was living in Seattle, working there and partly working with Aspire Ability. This was a couple of years ago, and I went home to visit my home in the reservation, middle of nowhere. It's about seven miles off the beaten path. I grew up with no electricity and all of that. I get home, the whole thing is lit up, but it's also lit up with broadband in my little community. And I'm like, oh my goodness, I can move home. I can do my job from home. And that's what propelled this idea. And I moved home and now I work at home, the middle of nowhere. I have broadband. I'm able to do Zoom meetings and all these other things from home. And that's the idea.

We want to be able to provide a space to bring our people back home to really build a nation and to fulfill that mandate that our elders gave of come home and bring the goodness that you have. But we're

starting, and all I know is that the Navajo Nation is excited, they're cautious, and that's fair given a number of organizations that come in and they do their thing and they leave, and there's rarely a mark that they were there. But part of what we're doing with Aspire Ability is we're coming in, we're building the capacity, and we have an exit date, when we're going to hand everything over to the tribe, to the members of our Navajos, whether they're in the tribe or not, or in the government or not, and allow them to do this themselves.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

How are you funding this? How are you making this all happen?

Amber Garrison Duncan, C-BEN executive VP:

This is a reflection of public-private partnership. I think what we have is organizations, so it's interesting. We're a non-profit. Aspire Ability is a new ed tech firm. We have funding from a private foundation, we have funding from Navajo themselves, we have each of our organizations are kind of doing in-kind pieces to make this all come to be. We have other requests into other private foundations, but there is legislation coming forward from the tribal council itself to really fund the bulk of the work with the colleges so that this becomes, again, something that is sustainable over time and that we use our public-private partnership to jumpstart and then move into longer term of this is, we are guidance versus having to do a lot of the work.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And over what kind of timeframe do you see this all happening?

Amber Garrison Duncan, C-BEN executive VP:

We have our current funding for two years and then we will have to reassess certainly, but that's why too we're working clearly with the tribal council to secure that. Again, doing our own grant funding and finding ways for this to be sustained. The other thing I would say with the colleges is from a C-BEN perspective, this is something that colleges are investing in themselves as well to make sure that they are providing relevant training and are able to serve their students. And so the colleges themselves also I think are very interested in investing their time and talents, whatever it is that can come to the table.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

That was my conversation with Moroni Benally and Amber Garrison Duncan, who shared their venture, the Navajo Nation Talent Marketplace. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, Editor in Chief of Working Nation. Thank you for listening.