

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.

For the last 11 years, Skills for Chicagoland's Future has been helping underemployed and unemployed local residents find work, with the cooperation and help of the local businesses and national businesses who operate locally. They're in the midst of expanding and it will be Skills for America's Future. Joining me today to talk about this expansion and the history of the program, are Daniel Cervantes, Senior Vice President for the Expansion for Skills for America's Future, and Camille DeCicco, Discover's Director of Social Impact. Thank you both for joining me.

Camille DeCicco, Discover, Social Impact Director:

Yeah, thank you.

Daniel Cervantes, Skills for America's Future, SVP:

Thank you, Ramona, for having us.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

So Daniel, let's start with you. Let's give a little history of Skills for Chicagoland's Future and how the program works.

Daniel Cervantes, Skills for America's Future, SVP:

Skills for Chicagoland's Future was launched actually on the heels of the financial recession and really at the heart of it is we started to see that in workforce development there was an opportunity to actually start and engage and go deep with employers in order to drive greater access to historically untapped talent. And what we saw over the course of time is if we can go work closely with an employer to really understand what their talent pain points were, we could work backwards and not only create greater access, but also work with community-based organizations and talent providers to support them in terms of giving their clients an opportunity.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

And what community have you been targeting in the last 11 years?

Daniel Cervantes, Skills for America's Future, SVP:

Yeah, over the last 11 years, one of the things that we said from the onset was we wanted to focus, particularly in Chicago, on the South and West sides of the city. Organically, as we started to both do our work but also become much more targeted in the last four years, we've seen that of the roughly 12,000 people that we've been able to place, 70% are actually coming from the South and West sides. So we are targeting the areas that we intended from day one, so really happy about that. And I'll also mention, Ramona, that as we started to see this pattern, Skills decided to increase and have a presence alongside other community partners in the South and West sides. So over the last three years we've actually opened up an office in the Inglewood community, as well as we have a West Side office now and continuing to look at where else can we potentially be located to be closer.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

And before we get into the details of the program, Camille, I'd like to talk to you as representing Discover, big company, national company with a local presence. Tell me how Discover became involved in this program and in what sense? How are you putting people to work?

Camille DeCicco, Discover, Social Impact Director:

Yeah, so it actually came straight from the top, our CEO, Roger Hochschild, he actually went to a book reading in Evanston from the author, Ibram Kendi, and was really struck by the concept of being not racist, but to be anti-racist is the difference. And so he took that to heart and very personally and had a belief thereafter that corporate site selection is an extremely biased process and that I think with the power and privilege that he has, he took that and said, "What is it that I can do as the leader of a large national company headquartered in the Chicagoland area?" Our headquarters is in Riverwoods, Illinois, which is a sort of northern suburb of the city, but we think of Chicago as our business community and our hometown.

And so he made a decision to say, "I would like to locate and build a new call center either on the South or West Side of Chicago, and put up to and now over 1,000 jobs on the South Side or West Side of the city." And that's really where when he started exploring that, we got introduced to Skills for Chicagoland's Future.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

So how does that work then? You have a big company that comes to the organization and how do you connect to the community and prepare workers for those jobs?

Daniel Cervantes, Skills for America's Future, SVP:

Ramona, I'll start with how to identify source and prepare talent for organizations like Discover. I think there's multiple ways. Number one is Skills aims to be that connective tissue. We're not expecting employers to necessarily know who's who when it comes to community based organizations talent providers, that's not necessarily what they're in the business for. And so what Skills aims to do over sort of its history, its connections throughout the communities is to one, identify who are those community organizations that are based within proximity of where Discover or any company's trying to recruit from.

I think Camille will go into it, but one of the things that was neat to see is in order to make a greater impact, they identified a five-mile radius from the Chatham location, so that they could impact more communities within the surrounding area. So one is who are those key community organizations and what are the key anchor institutions, community colleges that also provide talent? On our side, our goal is to basically break down the opportunity, the culture, the job description and make it in a way that is much more digestible, that people understand. More oftentimes even including myself, I find myself where if somebody hands over a particular job description, it may not be easily identified as like, is this something that I could do or be successful in? So again, breaking it down so that it's much more easier for folks to understand in terms of transferable skill sets.

I think the other thing that's important is one of the things that Skills has historically done is to set up monthly cadence where we're pulling in community organizations and allowing an employer like Discover to actually share and go above and beyond just the job description, but what's the culture like, what's the economic opportunities that exist within the organization, to go above and beyond. We don't want to make the assumptions that people in the community understand who that employer is or the brand associated with it. And I think the last piece is how do we go and use our sort of resources from a

marketing perspective to actually go out and target in particular in the ZIP codes that they're potentially interested in terms of pulling talent from.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

And then how are you introduced to the talent, Camille?

Camille DeCicco, Discover, Social Impact Director:

Yeah, so I think there was sort of a long journey before we actually got to that point. And I said when we were introduced to Skills, we hadn't actually chosen South or West Side, so they were really integral really every step of the way, introducing us to the right people, to say, "What are the sites that are available?" There isn't a lot of class A office space available in these areas, there have not even been jobs there that would necessitate those type of buildings. So they were really helpful in introducing us to developers and all the different people that you might need to be introduced to find or convert something in the class A office space. So we ended up finding an abandoned retail building and that's how we found ourselves on the South Side of Chicago, with council from Skills.

So that was sort of the start from a real estate perspective, then introducing us to the right government contacts at the right times to make sure we were going about all of those pieces appropriately. We had not opened a new call center in over 20 years and we had never done it in an underserved community, so they were really our guide throughout there. So that was the start, and then once we decided where, Skills became our consultant in many of the natural ways that any consultant is and was embedded across different components from talent acquisition, both helping us, like he said, from a marketing, sort of being in the community perspective. And we had one of their recruiters on our team, so like a staff OG model sort of helping us, teaching our recruiters how to seek the talent, how to bring them in and how to help them understand our culture, who we were.

And to actually not even understand, I think what we learned from Skills was to have them trust us as an employer in the community as well. That's sort of where I would, there's many other ways that they were embedded with us, but I think from a finding talent perspective was using what they already knew within the community, both the organizations connections, but also the ways in which you reach and find trust with the community, both from a partner, a neighborhood partner, how do you listen, how you embed yourself, and then how do you help them trust you that this is real.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

One of the things that I've always found inspiring is bringing, from what you guys are doing, is bringing in the employers to a community that needs that help. So you find the building, an abandoned building on the South Side of Chicago and there are a lot of underemployed people in that ZIP code and there's a lot of people, transportation can be an issue for people. So putting the job right there in that community makes it easier for people to find work, go to work, stay at work, and then also take care of their families.

Daniel Cervantes, Skills for America's Future, SVP:

I agree, Ramona. I mean, one thing that I would add is when Skills was first started, the big hairy audacious goal was always to work alongside with an employer to potentially bring jobs into a community. Over the course of the 11 years, one of the things that we were able to bring and share with Discover is literally the 11 years of working with companies that were looking at customer service oriented roles and seeing that many of them were actually traveling up to the suburbs and a lot of times

many folks were living on the South and West sides and they were in one and a half hour commutes. And I think that we've learned a lot throughout this process, especially around quality of life and quality jobs. I think oftentimes we're having a lot of those conversations, like what defines a quality job, but it's also the ability of just simply being able to drop off your kid at school. I mean, things like that matter so much to individuals, it goes above and beyond just the compensation.

Camille DeCicco, Discover, Social Impact Director:

And I think just to put some color to that, we see real examples of that all the time. And when Danny says an hour and a half commute, that's an hour and a half both ways. So you can think of the time spent away from your family. We have, I'm not sure what role he is, he's been promoted a few times at this point, but someone who started on our team named Aaron Curtis, and he literally was speechless when he was offered the job by our leadership team because he said, "My life is going to change because I will now be able to be with my daughter in the morning, get her ready for school and I will be able to pick her up from school and give her a bath and read to her," which was something he'd never been able to do. So when you say be with your family, that's actually a reality for some of the people that we've hired.

And one other example, we had someone who left Discover who was working at our corporate office but wanted to raise his family, his name's Tyrone Branch, on the South Side. He had relocated there but then left and went to a remote job and when the call center came back, there was an opportunity which he then applied for and came back and actually got promoted from where he had been before at Discover and was sort of serendipitous. But again, really a talent attractor in many different ways for both our talent on the South Side and what possibilities we have from being able to create meaning and proximity for people to their families and their lives and be happy employees in our company, but also for those in the professional services has really impacted our company as a whole, in a whole different way and people believe that we walk the walk when we have sort of this idea around social impact. So the talent acquisition extends beyond sort of the frontline talent, if you will.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

And Daniel, you are doing this with many employers in the Chicago area, you have done that. Do you see it changing communities? So when a Discover comes in and relocates there and starts hiring, do you see a change in the community itself?

Daniel Cervantes, Skills for America's Future, SVP:

Absolutely. I mean, I was just having this conversation actually with one of Camille's colleagues and as we were talking about the Discover, what they have done for the city of Chicago, several examples I can give you, but one in particular that just jumps out is when Discover opened up their center in Chatham, they could have easily gone the route of taking whatever provider they were using for catering and food services, as they do in Riverwoods or other call centers. But to make a commitment and pull in local small businesses to cater in food, not only are you building culture, but my goodness, the economic activity that is happening by large Fortune 500 to invest in that area, I mean, it's driving business.

From the construction and build out, to identify small minority owned and women owned businesses to be part of that process is big. I'm sure even when you think about, we're also having the conversation around the ability to pull in different local designers to reimagine and rethink about what are the types of offerings that they may, what I call corporate swag, to their employees. I will say you walk into the call center and we not too long ago had our peers from Phoenix where we launched another site in and I mean they just couldn't believe it. I told them, "When you walk into that call center, you're going to see

the vibe is just very different." People, I don't know, literally genuinely happy to be there and be part of something bigger that's happening within their community.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

And Camille, how does Discover feel about this? I mean, did you make that conscious choice to start using local talent and not just hiring but local businesses?

Camille DeCicco, Discover, Social Impact Director:

Yeah. And I think, I was just taking some notes for another presentation that we're working on later, but you referenced the quote quite often, that talent is everywhere opportunity has not been. And I think talent isn't just the people we hire directly or frontline customer service agents, but that's small business owners, that's restaurants, that's culture, like everything that you could imagine from a community, that's talent. You know kind of have to extend this belief that it exists and just has not been provided the opportunity. Don't get me wrong, you talk about equity, this really is the work of equity, to break your processes, to break your mindsets and to really rethink differently how do we qualify people versus disqualify? And again, that's beyond just a talent acquisition straight up like our direct employees, but that went from restaurants, you said, to construction firms, to the pest control, the landscaping.

We've really tried to take that to heart and I think very proud to say that's where you see the impact to a community is we have spent, I think last year, I believe the figures in 2022 where with, to help with our facility operations, \$800,000 directly into small businesses, minority owned businesses in the community and a million dollars spent with small restaurants to cater meals into our employees. So that is where you get scale and economic impact. It's the jobs, the income stays in the communities, but it's also the thriving business community and culture that we hope to be a part of. That's part our platform, we seek to use it in every way we can.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

And now, Daniel, you are expanding. Phoenix is the first stop on your, what is it, decade long plan here to get into many, many more cities around the country. Talk a little bit about what you're doing in Phoenix.

Daniel Cervantes, Skills for America's Future, SVP:

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, we publicly launched national expansion, although we dabbled in it a couple years back when we replicated the model in Rhode Island, we had six years of experience there, 11 years in Chicago. And collectively when we saw that 19,000 people got connected to employment and our employers were basically asking us can we take the show on the road and how can we work together, that's when we made the decision to go and launch this initiative in Phoenix. They're up and running, we're excited about it. I think one of the things that's unique there is it's a power buy model. So it's essentially taking the concepts of the jobs first model, bringing the proven processes, the systems, the employee relationships and embedding it within the local Chamber of Commerce, which is serving the Phoenix community area.

We're excited about it. There's a lot of opportunity for not only what we can bring to the region, but also excited about the learnings across the affiliate that we're going to also have an opportunity to really gain from. And one example I tend to use is while being in Phoenix, I've learned that there's tribal communities that want to get pulled into the workforce space. Now that's not something that you often

hear in Chicago or Rhode Island. And I think that as we gain experience in that space and learn from our peers out there, it's only going to benefit us sort of across the network.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

You're partnering with the Chamber of Commerce there, is that correct?

Daniel Cervantes, Skills for America's Future, SVP:

Yeah, the greater Phoenix Chamber of Commerce and the Skills powered by model, we view it as a stackable program. As you know, a Chamber of Commerce is already working with employers, but to be able to offer the Skills model, we view it as sort of the last model. The ability to not only engage with employers but now offer talent solutions.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

So what are your plans for the next decade? How are you planning to or how do you want to roll out this program?

Daniel Cervantes, Skills for America's Future, SVP:

I would say when it comes to national expansion, there's a lot of experimentation you learn and you sort of refine, and two go to market strategies that we're rolling out is one is kind of being invited into a community. We are well-connected within the local chambers, we're having conversations across the board with United Ways, the US Chamber of Commerce to really talk about how the Skills model is complimentary to what is already taking place within a economic development arm or local chamber. And so that process has been ongoing, it's a quarterly process where people, specifically talent organizations apply and that's how we got to Phoenix. There's interest obviously in Atlanta, Connecticut, so conversations are ongoing.

The second go to market strategy is working alongside employers. So if there's an employer that we've done some good work in, Discover's a great example, but also JPMorgan Chase, Skills in Chicago was pulled in to be a pilot partner in their second chance initiative that Jamie Diamond launched. And so immediately we saw some good success there and we're having conversations about how can we be supportive in other cities like Columbus where they're expanding that initiative too. Hopefully in the next couple of months we'll be able to share, things are looking really good as far as it relates to identifying one to two more locations before the end of this year.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

And Camille, if you had to speak to other businesses out there, why should they be partnering with Skills for America's Future?

Camille DeCicco, Discover, Social Impact Director:

I think part of it is don't go it alone. I think that's one of the most important things about this work and about being welcomed into a community, is we were really focused on not just landing, dropping, we wanted to be welcomed and we wanted to be invited. And I think Skills has the connection to help us do that and that's what we really learned from that. And just it allows you to create a posture of listening and I think they were really a supportive partner in keeping us focused on that and reminding us of that when we maybe might revert back into sort of our norm, but also in creating the connections and like I said, embedding with us and being a part of truly a true partnership with us. We had the same goal, we

had the same vision in mind to create a better Chicago and I think a better America and a better world is really what we're all after.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

Is there anything that either of you think that we missed to touch on in this conversation before I wrap it up?

Camille DeCicco, Discover, Social Impact Director:

The one thing for me that maybe that we didn't touch on is the role of corporations in this work is that we can't remove ourselves from it. We have to be a part of it. And I think one of the things that we talk about a lot is that large corporations have, is the power to put jobs at scale, and that's one thing that only large corporations can actually do. And I think this has been a great example of that and a great learning for us that this isn't just charity. I think there's two things I would point to, is that the learning is in the doing, when Danny talked about DE and I, is that we have learned so much and really accelerated our DE and I learning from an individual capacity, across all the people in our company, but also as a company.

This has really sort of helped us further ourselves along that journey, but also from a business results perspective. And we look at DEI as part of our business results, so I'm not trying to say that, we truly do, but at the same time, Chatham is a call center, it's an operation center, and the metrics that we have there, it is the best retention we have across any of the other customer care centers. We have 100% US-based customer service, we have sites in Delaware, Utah, Ohio, as well as Arizona, as well, Phoenix. So more to come on that, I'm sure in the future as well. There are real tangible business results from customer experience scores, our engagement of our employees, this is one of the best performing call centers we have. So I think beyond the ability for large corporations to do it, the results are really there too, that what you put in, you always end up getting out more than what you put in, I think is one way to look at it, both personally and from a company perspective.

Daniel Cervantes, Skills for America's Future, SVP:

One, I'd say that as we are moving forward, I think there's ... workforce development has an opportunity for us to think differently. I think there's a lot of upside, a lot of opportunity in front of us to reimagine how workforce development typically has been approached. There's a lot of federal funding that's coming out, but we have to start to reimagine the way we approach talent. I love what Camille said, which is obviously where you live should not dictate your economic opportunities. Talent is everywhere, but access is often not. And so major topics like skills-based hiring, starting to think about that and what a degree, a stackable credential industry recognized could mean. How do we create awareness at an earlier age so that people understand opportunities, not necessarily start just at the college level.

And I think third is the whole concept around diversity, equity, and inclusion. I'm optimistic that we're going to continue to make strides forward, but I do see when you have these constant pressures around you, inflation, labor tightness, what's going to happen? And I'm optimistic that major employers will be able to talk to each other, they'll see the benefits of doing the types of things that an organization like Discover's doing, and realize that it truly does benefit the organization as a whole, retention, mobility, but ultimately it benefits the communities in which each of us have a stake in.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

## Work in Progress Episode 276: Daniel Cervantes and Camille DeCicco

Daniel, thank you so much, Camille, thank you so much both of you for being on the Work in Progress Podcast.

Camille DeCicco, Discover, Social Impact Director:

Thank you.

Daniel Cervantes, Skills for America's Future, SVP:

Thank you for having us.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

I've been speaking with Daniel Cervantes, Senior Vice President of Skills for America's Future, and Camille DeCicco, the Director of Social Impact for Discover. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, Editor-in-Chief of WorkingNation. Thank you for listening.