

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You are 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. Today on the podcast, we're going to be talking about the Cogen Challenge to advance economic opportunity. The mission of the initiative is to elevate co generational models that bring older and younger generations together to help create a more inclusive and prosperous future. Here to talk to me about it today are Marci Alboher, vice president at CoGenerate, and Janet Oh, director of innovation at CoGenerate. Ladies welcome.

Marci Alboher, CoGenerate vice president:

Thanks, Ramona.

Janet Oh, CoGenerate director of innovation:

Thank you.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So let's set the stage here. Marci, tell me what CoGenerate is.

Marci Alboher, CoGenerate vice president:

Well, we are a national nonprofit and we support older and younger change makers who are working on solutions to a wide array of issues that are all bringing older and younger people together to solve problems, bridge divide, and create a better future. Co-create I should say, a better future. We do that in a lot of different ways, but that's our mission.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And why is that so important? What's the makeup of today's society generationally that your mission is so important?

Marci Alboher, CoGenerate vice president:

The main thing that's guiding us to this idea today is that we are perhaps the most age diverse society that we have ever experienced. We have more people living at every age between 17 and up to the eighties than have ever been alive at once. So a lot of people talk often about how we're an aging society, but the interesting thing is we are actually an all ages society, which means it's why you hear so many conversations these days about how can the generations get along at work, for example. But at the same time as we are this age diverse society, we are a highly age segregated society. So in many of the places that we live, that we work and that we learn, we are doing that in siloed ways. And there are also, as you may have heard, if you follow the media tensions between generations. So our work is really guided by those issues.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I agree with all that, but one of the things I often think is we do not live alone. We live with our parents, our grandparents, our children. So we already have some co-generating going on, but in the workplace for some reason, there are barriers, there's a generation gap. And I wonder if you have any thoughts on why that is?

Marci Alboher, CoGenerate vice president:

I'll start, and then I would like Janet to chime in here. Some workplaces are really doing a good job of trying to intentionally have, let's say, age diversity as part of their diversity and equity initiative. So I applaud that where it's happening. But in many workplaces there are age silos. For example, we often, just as in other forms of diversity, we hire people who look like us, who travel in the same networks that we do. So if you have an organization that is, let's say, founded or led by people of certain ages and generations, they often recruit in that way. And you get these organizations that are just not age diverse. So we're seeing some movement where there are organizations that are really trying to reach out and make age diversity part of how they hire and how they structure teams. The benefit of doing that, of course, is that you could speak to different audiences, you can make your products and services relevant to people of all ages, but we have a long way to go to get there. Janet, do you want to jump in on this one?

Janet Oh, CoGenerate director of innovation:

Yeah, I think I look a lot to the nonprofit sector and to the social good sector, and I think sometimes it can be hard in terms of working across generations, especially as you get to the ends of the spectrum of working with teens and working with people who are 50 and older. And I think even at a very basic level, what do we call each other? I've worked with college students and held workshops where older and younger are coming together and the younger truly did not know what to call the older in the room, kind of feeling like the term elderly wasn't right, but sometimes that would slip out. And so I think some of these honest conversations that really require trust building of first we need to become friends. It's really about organic human relationships, and then we can dive into what feels a little tense so that we can work together to bring our talents together.

Marci Alboher, CoGenerate vice president:

I'll add one other thought that really builds on what Janet said is when we talk about age diversity, especially in the workplace, often it's those at the extremes that get left out and that feel marginalized. So we have that, I often say it's the youngest and the oldest who really need the most consideration, the youngest who are trying to break in off into a job market where they don't yet have experience and they have to figure out how to get on the first rung of the ladder, and often the oldest who are starting to experience ageism and feel that the workplace isn't structured for them or they may be feeling less relevant than they used to. So we think of thinking a little more intentionally about those two groups.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And you even mentioned a little bit earlier Marci, benefits. There are so many benefits. We can mentor each other, we can mentor that younger generation to the workplace. Older workers have the knowledge, they've problem solved. There's a lot of really good benefits in that mentoring. And also older workers can get mentoring from the younger workers on changes in technology that may have not yet gotten to them. Not that the older worker isn't capable of understanding that, but we all know younger people adapt so much quicker to today's technology. It's joking about being born with a cell phone in your hand, but a lot of that may come into their realm of experience or awareness a lot quicker. That is at the heart of what the Cogen Challenge is about, is bringing these two groups together and then creating a more economically prosperous future. Janet, why don't you tell us a little bit about what the challenge is all about?

Janet Oh, CoGenerate director of innovation:

Sure. Yeah. So we're super excited to be launching the Cogen Challenge, which will provide \$20,000 to innovators bringing youngers and older to solve critical problems. Our first challenge is focused on advancing economic opportunity. So we're looking for eight innovative models, and besides the funding, we're providing six months of a learning community where these organizations will be experimenting with their ideas, iterating and learning from one another.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And can you explain what you're looking for in those examples? Who do you want to come and talk to you about this? Who do you want to apply?

Janet Oh, CoGenerate director of innovation:

Yeah. Well, I think one goal of the challenge is to really unleash people's creativity on how to utilize the talents of youngers and older. So we totally expect to be surprised and delighted by the things that we see. I think sometimes we find solutions that are hidden in plain sight that are already there, but haven't really been named and identified. And then sometimes we find ideas that are first of its kind, but maybe it would be helpful to share a few examples from our previous innovators to give people a flavor of what we might find or be looking for. So one is in the field of home sharing, and it comes from an organization called Homeless Intervention Services of Orange County, and that's where they match homeowners with college students who are in desperate need of housing.

And I was really shocked to learn the statistic that in a California survey they did, one in five community college students and one in 10 university students are housing insecure. So much so that a local college had opened up a parking lot, so students who needed to could sleep in their cars. So at this local college in Orange County, they realized that 4,500 young adults at this college were housing insecure, and they thought, what can we do about that? As they looked around, they saw a lot of homeowners who had a spare room that could rent them to college students for affordable rents, and they set up an agreement where the college student does five hours of work around the house to help out in exchange for lower rent. And what we see is not just the solution to affordable housing, but there's kind of a magic that's created in terms of the relationship that's formed where older and younger are coming together to become friends and sometimes even chosen family.

There is a recent pair that I heard from, Melanie and Kathleen and Melanie, the student described Kathleen the homeowner as the most fun roommate she's ever had, as fun as her friends her age, but without the drama. And I think just for both of them, for the homeowner, what an honor to be held in that regard by someone younger. And eventually Melanie moved out and went on to grad school and Kathleen found another roommate to share her home with. But I think those are the kind of solutions that we're looking for. It's like these solutions that are solving a problem in our economic world, but also really built on human connection and making the sum of the parts greater.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

It seems that that example is a very good one. And I live in Los Angeles, and I remember about a year and a half ago, maybe two years ago now, I was working on a story about UCLA and how there was a church that was fairly close to there, had opened up rooms for the students who were living in their cars. And it was something you didn't think about, but without that support, you wouldn't have that chance for economic stability or the chance for the mobility. So you're looking for in this particular challenge, it sounds like you're looking for more of those, but they don't have to look exactly like that program.

Marci Alboher, CoGenerate vice president:

Right. And I think you touched on it, Ramona, and I love that when you look at WorkingNation and in this podcast, you're not just looking about what happens on the job, you're looking at all the things in people's lives that set them up to then have a good job. And if you don't have a place to live, that's foundational. And if you don't have access to food and if you don't, so food insecurity could be part of this, housing stability, of course, educational access, skills training. When we think about skills training, we know that we all need skills training at the early parts of our careers, but we also need re-skilling at later parts of our careers. And what if people who needed those things could be in a place where they're getting them together, not necessarily separately. Well then some other relationships might form and in just the kind of way that Janet was talking about those relationships in the housing example.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I also think, and I liked when you said this, that these two people became friends, your example. Best roommate she ever had without the drama, which was really a great thing to hear. But also that understanding that you've been talking about of the co generational understanding, not looking at someone who's older as less than, or someone who's younger as less than, looking at them as equals seems like an important part of the mission of this initiative and of CoGenerate in general.

Marci Alboher, CoGenerate vice president:

Yeah, for sure, when we look at our foundational values, mutuality and respect and what we would call asset framing of both what the younger bring and the older bring is all core to how we see this idea in the world.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So a successful candidate for this new initiative, what will they go through? How do you support them? \$20,000 is great, but how do you support them in developing out the beginning of their plan or taking it to the next step?

Janet Oh, CoGenerate director of innovation:

Yeah. And I think that's where the community of eight, that's a really intentional part because I think we found that our innovators really learn from doing and learning from each other. So we designed this six month accelerator that will really help people provide a container where they can test and share and have this regular rhythm where they're coming together to get the space to do that.

Marci Alboher, CoGenerate vice president:

And Ramona, this program will culminate in a showcase where we will tell the stories of these eight innovators so that helps them to lift up their model, get more attention on them out in the world.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

As a emeritus fellow for, I will say CoGenerate slash encore.org, the support has been there not only throughout the fellowship, but in the two and a half years since, three and a half years, three years, oh my goodness. It ended right at the pandemic I recall. But the support has been there, the community has been there, and exchanging ideas and bouncing ideas off of everyone has always been a great benefit of that initial program.

Marci Alboher, CoGenerate vice president:

Ramona, I feel like we should tell people that you participated in a different program of our organization. The Encore Public Voices Fellowship was designed to amplify diverse voices at the intersection of aging, social justice, and intergenerational issues. So this work at WorkingNation really embodies all of those things.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Is there a limit on who can apply for this program? What are some of the parameters around it? So if I'm sitting at home listening to this podcast going, oh, I'd like to do that, what do they need to know about that?

Janet Oh, CoGenerate director of innovation:

It's broad, but we are looking for US-based solution so while you could be doing international work, we will focus on the US part of it, of bringing youngers and older together to solve a problem in advancing economic opportunities. So that is the main criteria. And then I think we're looking for innovators who are really eager to jump in and be with peers to test and learn and to be generous with each other and be in this iterative state. We found that our innovators are often very lonely, that this is a new field, and so coming together in this group gives them a chance to, as one innovator said, take off their mask and really be honest about what is hard and what is working, and then come together to open doors for one another.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So what are some of the other projects CoGenerate are working on that are also in the space that are trying to bridge this gap and create generational wealth? And I use that not just in the economic terms, but in the spiritual terms.

Marci Alboher, CoGenerate vice president:

All right. I'll talk about one project that we... It's not public yet, but I can say that we're working on this really interesting research project to find out what younger leaders want from older collaborators. And that's going to be a project that we'll be designing with a lot of input from young leaders themselves. And we will be conducting a round table conversation with carefully selected group of young leaders to really listen to them. And we'll have a report that comes out that really, it will be useful to, I would say, all older people who want to become allies to young leaders and partner with them, support them, maybe work for them as many older people are doing these days. So that's one project I'm excited about. Janet, you got one.

Janet Oh, CoGenerate director of innovation:

Yeah. I think the other project that I'm excited about is really helping organizations or individuals who'd want to do more of this work. I think sometimes people, when they hear us talk about our work, they get excited and it just is so common sense. Ramona, like you were saying, we all grew up in intergenerational households. It just, I think really resonates with people. But I think then sometimes people get stuck with the question, how do I get started? And so we're developing some tools and also hosting webinars to really dig into what are some of the best practices, what are the pitfalls? I think there is an idealized notion of when you bring youngers and older together, it should look warm and fuzzy and happy. And at the core of it it's a human relationship. So sometimes it does look like that, like

Melanie and Kathleen, but sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes it's awkward. Sometimes you don't know what to call each other. Sometimes you say the wrong thing. And how do you design the work to be able to hold that and then move forward as well?

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And on a personal note, how are you both living co generational lives?

Marci Alboher, CoGenerate vice president:

So it's interesting when you talk about, it all starts in family. And one thing that I'll say is I am one of the many people over 50 who doesn't have any kids of my own. So I've had to be, and there are now more and more of us out in the world, and I've had to be super intentional then about how I engage with younger people because if I didn't pay much attention to it outside of my own family, I wouldn't know a lot of young people. So I'm really committed to mentoring organizations and I usually join to get involved on the mentor side, but as any mentor would tell you, I end up receiving as much as I give. And I am a really active member of a community called Girls Right Now, which is a community that centers on writing, which is one of my passions, I'm an author.

And I joined that community because I live in New York City and I wanted to meet teenagers in my own city who shared this passion of mine around writing. And I'm a first generation college graduate in my family, and most of these students are going to be the first generation in their family. So I have that commonality with a lot of the young people I was meeting. And what I learned by joining this community though, is that I did get as much as I give. It was a way that was helping me really feel tuned into what are the trends that are happening in publishing and what are these emerging diverse voices? How are they going to change the way we talk about issues and the way we write in the formats that we use? And that's an example of a community that's super important to me, and I have a lot of now younger and older friends through that work.

Janet Oh, CoGenerate director of innovation:

For me, I think I try to keep it really simple and I just try to focus on making more friendships that span the ages. And I just read this today actually, but Chip Conley at Modern Elder Academy asked this question of people of if you thought of your five closest friends, how many of them are either a decade younger or older? And I think what he found was that 80% of people don't have friends who are younger or older more than a decade. And so I think that's been one of my goals is just in my neighborhood. I find a lot of joy in connecting and building community with my neighbors, so it looks really simple.

It's just like hosting or attending these barbecues and happy hours that we have, sending my kids around the neighborhood, knocking on doors when we've made a baked good to share and just trying to build that connection and social fabric. And I think like that story of Melanie, I told it does help to have, especially I'm thinking of a particular older neighbor where she's been through so much life that as I go through more and more life, when I turn to her, she gives me a unique perspective that is usually pretty calm. And it's not about solving the problem or going down a rabbit hole of emotion with me, but just an example of care and compassion and sort of a, been there and you'll get through it kind of perspective.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I'm going to chime in here with my own co generational. Our daughter lives with us. She's 27. I will have to say, I've made friends with her friends and I value their perspective on things and how they look at... They're all older now, but we've always, both my husband and I have always been a friend to her friends

and talk to them like real people. And I say real people because when you're an adult and you're talking to a 17 year old, sometimes maybe you don't talk to them the way you should. And we've learned, I think, through this relationship and our closeness with our own daughter. So close that September 9th, I'll be at the Jonas Brothers concert with three of them.

Janet Oh, CoGenerate director of innovation:

Yay.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Yay. And I was going to wear a t-shirt that says, I am not your great-great-grandmother. So if anybody's a Jonas Brothers fan out there, they'll know what that means. But I appreciate both of your perspectives and sharing also your personal perspective on this. We'll have more about the Cogen Challenge on the website, and it'll have things like the application deadlines, et cetera. So you can see it at workingnation.com.

Marci Alboher, CoGenerate vice president:

Thank you so much, Ramona.

Janet Oh, CoGenerate director of innovation:

Thank you, Ramona.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Thank you both. I've been speaking with Marci Alboher, vice president of CoGenerate, and Janet Oh, director of innovation at CoGenerate. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief at WorkingNation. Thank you for listening.