

Work in Progress Episode 298: Taj Eldridge, JFFLabs managing director of climate innovation:

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.

The climate is changing and we need millions of green workers to help prepare for, recover from, and adapt to these changes. Today we're talking with Taj Eldridge, managing director, Climate Innovation at JFF Labs. Taj, thank you for joining me on the podcast.

Taj Eldridge, JFFLabs managing director of climate innovation:

Hi, Ramona. Great to be here. Long time listener, first time caller.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

A ditto head, shall I call you that? Thanks, Taj. And it's good to see you again. I really appreciate you being on the podcast.

Taj Eldridge, JFFLabs managing director of climate innovation:

Same here.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So let's start out. I like to define green jobs and I'd love to hear your definition of it because when we have said traditionally green jobs, people have an image of solar panel, wind turbine, those are the two images I think still come to people's mind. So how would you describe green job?

Taj Eldridge, JFFLabs managing director of climate innovation:

I love this question because it sets the stage for what we're doing with CREST, with JFF Labs and Aries funded by us. Green jobs, we believe that all jobs can be and will be green jobs. And the reason for that is because we think that sustainability is no longer going to be this offset by itself idea, it is encompassing everything that we're doing from what we're putting inside of our bodies, how our food has grown to what we're putting on our bodies, the clothing that we're wearing and the materials that we're having as well. And also legacy industries. So a lot of times too, Ramona, a lot of people think that green jobs only means green tech jobs or early stage venture backed companies. For us, it also means these legacy companies in legacy industries that are thinking of new ways to be more sustainable, to attract a new market. And I think the difference now that we see here is that the population is pushing it, the population is wanting this. And I think that's the difference than what we've seen before.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

We did a report about a year and a half ago now, for our Green Jobs Now series, and we did this with Lightcast and our numbers came up to be 51.6 million jobs in all industries. This is an amazing number of jobs that could actually be green. And as you pointed out, this could be in fashion. You opened my eyes to that. I hadn't even realized the impact of clothing manufacturing and then all the clothes that we have and where do they go. Tell me a little bit about that. I think our audience would find that interesting.

Taj Eldridge, JFFLabs managing director of climate innovation:

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Absolutely. For those, before coming to JFF, I was an investor, still I'm an investor, but I also was an investor in the apparel and fashion space. And it was there that really kind of sparked my interest in the idea of the greening of industries, because I later learned that fashion accounts for more greenhouse gas emissions than aviation and shipping combined. And that's for a few factors. It's the manufacturing of the product and the water that we're using, the energy that we're using, the waste that we're using. We also have to think about our grandparents and our great-grandparents, their closets were much different than ours, right? Because now we have so much choice and I think it's great to have choice, but also to that idea of choice is what's also hurting our environment and our company because we're having these multitude of things in our closets that we don't use, we discard differently, sometimes, not appropriately.

And I think it impacts that. And so for me, that's one of the things that I love, that's a visual representation of climate change and the ability to change it is for people to start thinking about the things they're putting on their body and how they're looking at it. But also too, Ramona, I love the fact that when we talk about fashion or apparel to be more broadly, it's not just the responsibility of the consumers, but it's also the responsibility of the corporations and the companies that are making these products. And I think from there we take it from this nice thing to do to an economic thing to do, which I think makes it a little bit more palatable for industries to focus on it.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Some of the jobs that are available now, and will be available next year are coming also out of the Infrastructure and Jobs Act. There's a lot of push in that particular piece of legislation to refurbish our roads, refurbish our bridges, and those create jobs in entirely different industries as well, construction architecture. So those opportunities exist. How are people able to tap into those?

Taj Eldridge, JFFLabs managing director of climate innovation:

I love the fact that number one, our government, federal government decided to have these laws in place from the Infrastructure Act to the CHIPS bill and so many others to really move us forward. I also think that this idea of climate resiliency, the focus on climate and workforce is a global idea because I think that the green space, we're in the adolescent phase, I would say, we're not nowhere near the adult phase and the mature phase of this [inaudible 00:05:26]. So there's a lot of growth, there's a lot of changes and there's a lot of organic changes. And I think there's a lot of learnings that are happening outside of our country, which is one of the reasons I love the fact that CREST not only looks at the US but also our partners in India. So I [inaudible 00:05:40] to say when I was in Germany, I saw this idea of induction charging, where there was charging mechanism within the road.

So as you were driving on the road, your car is being charged simultaneously. The reason I mentioned that is I'm looking at the fact that we're looking at opportunities to really transform our infrastructure around traveling and transportation. One of the freedoms of America is the fact that we can go from one place to another in our state, and we love to do so, especially those of us in California. And I think that the transition to electric vehicles or any type of vehicles where there's biodiesel vehicles, biogas vehicles, is going to need the infrastructure that's there, and not just in the places where they're at, but also in our national parks and so many different other places. So I think that there's a lot of opportunity, but more so there's a lot of opportunity for imagination to think more about how can we make this go further.

One of the companies that we mentioned in one of our reports on CREST, that's also a company that JFF ventures invest in is called ChargerHelp. And I look at that as one of those tertiary examples. And so we

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have the primary of focusing on electric vehicles and having people drive them the secondary of the infrastructure around it, but then the tertiary of how do you repair and ensure that infrastructure is working properly. And so I think about that and I love the fact that you have three different opportunities, three different types of skills to have jobs in these industries, from building the vehicles to building the charging infrastructure to maintaining the charging infrastructure. All of those three things are creating job opportunities. And so that's when I think about when I hear about the various policies around climate, when I hear about the opportunities around it and why I get excited about the entrepreneurs that are in this space to really kind of think about what can we build on top of what's already existing.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

If I remember my history correctly, also ChargerHelp here LA based, they had created a couple of years ago training programs to train people on how to repair chargers. And they went into communities that had been environmentally damaged. So Downtown LA was one of them to start those cohorts of trainers, and that brings up the idea of equity. There's an opportunity to bring in communities that have been damaged by bad environmental choices and help them economic mobility, but also help their community environmentally.

Taj Eldridge, JFFLabs managing director of climate innovation:

Absolutely. And I think full disclosure, when I worked at an organization called the Los Angeles Cleantech Incubator, one of the most popular incubators in Southern California for climate and one of the leaders in the space. And I first invested in ChargerHelp then and what I loved about them, you're right, they often looked at communities that were impacted by climate and environmental factors and recruited from those communities and what they wanted to do, and what I loved about it is that sometimes the people from those communities need to be a part of the solution, they need to have ownership in it. And I think that's one of the things that's been lacking when we have this conversation about climate and about communities, especially communities of color and communities and the like.

What I also loved about ChargerHelp is they had an all female cohort to go through. And so a lot of times when we talk about this idea of jobs, we also have to think about occupational segregation that happens from a gender standpoint. And I love the fact that she and the founders, Camille Terry, that she also was intentional about the audiences and the people that she wanted to train and ensure they had these skills for this. So I think it was awesome.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

When we talk about the green jobs that we could create out of this. And by the way, I want to get back to entrepreneurs in a minute, but I want to talk about the idea that green jobs must be quality jobs. These have to be family sustaining jobs.

Taj Eldridge, JFFLabs managing director of climate innovation:

Yeah. Ramona, I'll give you a perfect example. We both were talking about Southern California. So I live in between two counties, both Los Angeles County and Riverside County where my wife is a professor at the local university. And Riverside County is probably about 45 minutes east of Los Angeles, more family orientated, I would say a lot of homes that are here for people to live. But the unfortunate part about it is that you have a large number of people who live here because of a cost situation, but they travel more than an hour and a half each way, sometimes two hours each way in traffic to get the jobs in Los Angeles

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County. And so for me, I started to think about this idea of place-based innovation, how can we ensure that there are jobs close to the areas that we work and we live. For me, that's part of quality, because you're reducing your quality by the amount of time you're spending on the road.

And further, if you don't have EV creating greenhouse gas emissions that we have to think about. One of the other things that we highlighted in our CREST program was this idea of wraparound services. I'm on the board of an organization here in Los Angeles called Homeboy Industries, and that's a board that works with people who are formerly incarcerated. And I'm proud to know that they've heard about the work we've been doing around CREST and now they're thinking about ways and have been getting into the climate space with jobs for these individuals. But I think one of the things we've talked about is people in certain populations who don't have access to good quality financial tools or who don't have access to getting credit in order to ensure that they have ways to get to their job without having to rely on certain types of transportation.

So when I think about quality, I think not only about the wages that people are making, but about all of those things that come into your life about your job. How far can you advance in these jobs? How are you learning and you're adding on skills? One other thing I would say that I love the fact is that I have a terminal degree and I always thought that what that means for me is that no more school, but what that really mean was yes, no more school, but that did not mean no more learning. And I think that that's one of the other things that you think about when you're having a good quality green job is that being able to have skills and add skills so that way as the market changes and the market will change, because remember I said when in the adolescent phase, you're able to shift with those changes and ensure that you're finding jobs and getting good quality jobs as your career grows.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

A couple of times you and I have mentioned CREST, Climate-Resilient Employees for a Sustainable Tomorrow. Now that's an initiative that JFF is doing with Aries and World Resources Institute. Explain how CREST is going to try to close the gap between the demand for the skilled workforce that we've been talking about that we need for green jobs, and the people that need that extra training to get those opportunities.

Taj Eldridge, JFFLabs managing director of climate innovation:

As an investor for the last 10 plus years, 15 years nearly in the climate space, as an investor, we're in the process of creating jobs. We're investing in these companies. These companies in turn create job opportunities like ChargerHelp. I started to see as more companies were maturing that, do we have a valid workforce? Do we have people who have not only the passion, but they have the skills or people who have the skills but they don't have the knowledge about these jobs that are there? And I think one of the things I love about CREST, as you mentioned, the Climate-Resilient Employees for Sustainable Tomorrow funded by Aries, the fact that we are working with local regional opportunities, organizations, municipalities, universities, schools, community colleges, in order to train and place individuals into these jobs. We have a quantitative goal. The goal is 25,000 jobs within five years, but that's the minimum goal.

And the hope is that the work that we're doing is catalytic that other organizations would come on and say and see the issues that we're attacking and add to it, because we're going to need more organizations focus on this, more partners and everyone else. And I think what's interesting about CREST for us, we looked at it in three different standpoints. We looked at it number one, as working with regions and we wanted to include rural regions. We wanted to include indigenous communities because

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again, climate impacts, climate is not just going to, we can't just solve the climate crisis in California and think we're done. We can't just solve it in the biggest cities in our country and think we're done. It is something that impacts the smallest of the smallest cities in this region, from Jackson, Mississippi to Aurora, Illinois. And so we have to make sure that we're having this diversity not just from a race and gender standpoint, but from a geographic standpoint.

The other two things that I think is really important about the work we've done is that we're working with entrepreneurs both on the climate space to learn about the needs that they're looking at for jobs, but also personal financial systems. Because we talked about before as people are getting these transition from different type of industries into these jobs, the wages may change, the wraparound services may be additive, and how can we truly build what we call green wealth in this space by looking at either saving money or enhancing opportunities around financials.

And then lastly, what I loved about what we've done within the partnership of CREST is we provided these definitions. When we first began, we talked about defining green jobs and it came directly from our report that we did around CREST. The other thing that we're looking at is how do we talk about the skills that are needed for these jobs. Are there skills that are currently there? Are there skills that are adaptive? Are there skills that have not been decided upon yet? But we want to make sure that people have this mentality of a lifelong learning mindset to ensure that they can get these skills that come apart. So I'm excited about it, Ramona, because I feel like it's preparing us for the future beyond what we see.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Are you going to be working with regional workforce development organizations to help craft that particular type of training or are you going to act as an advisor or will you be saying, here's what you need, who's making those determinations?

Taj Eldridge, JFFLabs managing director of climate innovation:

I think the key to this is that it has to be relevant for the regions that you're at. And so from that standpoint, not only capital that we've provided and will continue to provide, but also technical assistance that I think is needed. The reason I talk about that, it's very specific to regions. And I'll give you a perfect example. I grew up in Texas, I grew up in the south. I'm a southern boy who lives in California, Southern California. But I think about sometimes there are opportunities where our language matters and language is different. How you're describing the type of jobs we're talking about, how you're describing that may be antagonistic to some. And for us it is less about the language we're using, but about the effort and about the outcome. The outcome is having this person in this job that's going to reduce and really speak to climate resiliency and making sure they're aware of that.

And so I think that's one of the reasons that we are focusing on how can we provide this technical assistance along with it. The other thing I think too is that we've seen is that a lot of the regions that we looked at, we began this conversation talking about a lot of the policies that are coming down the line that are geared to help us, but unfortunately, if you're not a big city like a Los Angeles or New York, you may not have the woman power to take advantage of all these things or to know what's coming out of the pipeline or know how things can positively benefit you. And I think that's one important part of the work that we're trying to do also is how can we be in a liaison, a convener or partnership between the Federal Government Department of Energy and others to those regions to ensure that they're maximizing the effort and complimenting the capital and the expertise that we're providing to these regions as well.

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Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I think two points that I'd like to emphasize, there are the language that you're talking about. For some people, the term green jobs, it can be divisive, it can be off-putting, and again, there could be misunderstanding, but there are the skills that people have underlying that are still going to be needed, whether it's manufacturing or the construction that we talked about before. It doesn't matter the outcome of what you're doing, those skills are still there. And I think that is an important thing to share. And then the other idea that being that making people aware of the jobs just in general. We at WorkingNation really try hard to tell the stories of opportunity. That is our underlying mission. Here are the opportunities to get the skills that you need that you may not know, those opportunities exist. So finding ways to get that word out there, I support that effort on your part and really happy that you guys are taking that on as well.

Taj Eldridge, JFFLabs managing director of climate innovation:

Absolutely. I think that often what I think about too, Ramona, is that a lot of the conversations that I've had over the years around climate investing has been in a bubble. It's been with others who like me understand it. We come from this area, we invest in it. As of late, I started thinking about how can we communicate to others outside of that bubble. And I think that's important and I think we need to position it differently. I think, unfortunately, myself included, when people would talk about climate, when people would talk about environmentalism, it would seem not serving for some people because some people will say, well, I have financial issues I'm thinking about, or I have health issues I'm thinking about, I can't think about saving the planet and saving the earth. But that's because we never talked about saving the planet and saving the Earth can do two things.

They can save us and really have a public health impact, and also have an economic impact for us as well. And I think those shifts have been important. And those shifts I think came from, again, the abundance of diversity in this space. And again, not just speaking about diversity of race and gender, but diversity of ideas. I think that's the ultimate idea of why race and gender matters, because you have a different viewpoint, especially from a geographic standpoint of how things work and how things will impact others. And I think that's important.

And so I'm excited that the awareness is a huge part of CREST as well, to ensure that we're reaching out and looking at different ways to have these conversations, whether it's on national publications, whether it's on partnering on podcasts like this, or whether it's really going deep into regions and having just dinners like we did at New Orleans, a few months ago with community leaders to have these conversations to reduce that thought that climate is only means, or climate jobs only means knocking on doors to sell solar. It is so much more than that. And I think one of my life's mission is to ensure that every American has an opportunity to at least know what these jobs are, so they can make the decision on do they want to come into this industry.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And I promised earlier that I wanted to go back to the entrepreneurs part of this, this innovation opportunity that's out there. So JFF has started Entrepreneurs-in-Residence. Tell me what kind of companies you're looking at, what's your first cohort look like and where are they located?

Taj Eldridge, JFFLabs managing director of climate innovation:

Well, number one, I'm excited that they're located all over the US, and so that's an important part of it. I'll give you some examples of a few. One is called Mi Terro that's located in that region that I mentioned

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that's east of LA. Again, really what I love is this founder really started by working on companies to where, and he's a second time founder, so he kind of went through this before, but the first product he developed was, and I actually have it on, where he looked at how can he take spoiled milk from one of his family's farm and turn it into materials. And he did that, he created this line of clothing starting with shirts that was used from spoiled milk, and the enzymes of spoiled milk. And next you start thinking about, well, that's fashion, and we've had this conversation around fashion, but what is the next thing that we need to look at?

And that's food packaging. So we start to look at how can we take these things that we use to use as waste and turn them into packaging for food. Given that post pandemic, a lot of us are ordering out more and a lot of us are getting things delivered to us, and that would creates this waste. How can we create biodegradable waste in that space? And I think that's really important about it. So that's Mi Terro. Another company I think is really interesting in this space is a founder based in New York, [inaudible 00:21:51] has a company Renewable, that's looking at this idea of waste in agriculture and agribusiness. And again, from what I talked about from the very beginning is that climate is more than just about solar and EVs. It is about what we put inside of our bodies and we'll put on our bodies.

And so I think those are two examples of Mi Terro, putting on our bodies and then Renewable, what's going inside of our bodies, how things are grown in this country. And I love the fact that when we created this, when this Entrepreneur-in-Residence program was created, it gave an opportunity for those founders to start thinking about workforce on their own. It gave them an opportunity to start thinking about staffing and utilizing the breadth and the depth of JFF, who've had all these years of workforce to think about that part of their business also, because I think unfortunately a lot of times founders, that becomes staffing, hiring, training, it becomes important, but it's overshadowed by creating the product. It's overshadowed by fundraising. And I always used to tell founders when I invest is, "What happens after you get my check? What happens after you get this capital?"

You shouldn't think about those things after you get capital, you should think about those things with it to ensure it, because it costs a lot of money to continue to train if you're having this reduction of staff, and so you want to make sure you're creating that. The other thing I love about it too, Ramona, is that what our cohort and the six wonderful founders in the cohort were also influencing others. So since that time we've announced it, we've seen so many other companies look at the idea of workforce, how can they focus on creating opportunities for jobs that are different, that are quality grid jobs in the space. So again, even just having these wonderful founders in our program has also created awareness with other founders about the issues that we're looking at within CREST.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Taj, I want to thank you for taking the time to be on the podcast. It's always a pleasure to talk to you, and I love your perspective on this. I love how you look at it as a holistic, humanistic mission. It just doesn't have one spoke to it.

Taj Eldridge, JFFLabs managing director of climate innovation:

Absolutely. And I think, Ramona, that's what makes the work we do fun, it makes this work we do important, and I'm so proud to have partners, our World Resources Institute and funded by Aries to move this work. And I hope we have others, I hope others come into this space and see that the opportunities are here. One of the funds we know, the Family Workers Fund just announced a \$50 million program similar to focus on a workforce and climate. So we hope that the work we've done, the

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work we're continuing to do are catalytic to this industry because there are 75 million Americans that we want to make sure have access and reduce barriers for the jobs in this nation, including green jobs.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Thank you, Taj.

Taj Eldridge, JFFLabs managing director of climate innovation:

All right, thank you.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I've been speaking with Taj Eldridge, managing director, Climate Innovation at JFF Labs. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of WorkingNation. Thank you for listening.