

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. Using tech to advance accessibility at work and at home was a key theme at this year's big CES 2024 conference in Las Vegas earlier this month.

It is also the mission of the Consumer Technology Association Foundation, the philanthropic arm of the organization that runs the conference. Executive director Steve Ewell sat down with me at CES to talk about the ways the foundation is supporting tech companies that can improve the lives of two growing yet often overlooked populations, older adults and people with disabilities.

Steve Ewell, CTA Foundation executive director:

When we created the foundation, we obviously were tied to the trade association that represents the technology industry and runs CES here. So we looked at what the industry is already doing in philanthropy, and we realized that there were two growing yet often overlooked populations that was older adults and people with disabilities. So we really approach ways to use technology to improve lives of people in those populations. We do that through three core pillars, one of which is convening, so it's bringing people together.

So obviously, here at CES, we're bringing a lot of people together, but we also do activities like we had an accessibility round table where we brought together industry and advocates to talk about different issues that are impacting things like AI and hybrid work environments and other things along those lines that technology can make a difference in. Getting the right people in the room, having the right conversations we really see as critical. Our second pillar is around promoting innovation. So we do a number of programs.

We give away five booths every year at CES for startups that have technologies that could benefit either older adults or people with disabilities. So we've got five great startups here this year. We also had a pitch competition the other day. This year focused on health tech but had eight companies from all over the world pitching their products and had a really incredible, basically a mouth-based controller that one, the judge's choice, and the audience choice was a company that does like care plans and other things along those lines.

So some really interesting products and just a massive audience for that program. So it's really serving to both recognize companies that are doing this work really well, but also serving to kind of be a little bit of a carrot to attract the attention of companies that maybe hadn't addressed aging or disability yet. And the last is we do grants. We are... We're not a massive funder, but we do about a half a million dollars a year in grants to nonprofits around the US that are using technology to help either older adults or people with disabilities.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I love that you've recognized that... as an organization, that you recognize that these are two populations that are often overlooked. There's a lot of fear in the community. I'll start with the older workers. There's a lot of fear that technology is going to somehow leave them behind. So it sounds like you are, in a way, investing in, whether it's your time or some of your philanthropic dollars, in companies that are actually helping older adults live a better life. Tell me a little bit about how technology can impact them.

Steve Ewell, CTA Foundation executive director:

Yeah. So it's a wide variety of different programs. So one is looking at the types of technologies that can create social connections, looking at the types of technologies that can help people stay in the workforce longer if they choose to and if they want to. In many cases, some people need to stay in the workforce longer. So helping to enable that. Getting people connected with the skills that they need as well.

So a lot of the programs we support are around technology, training and education. We see that there's a real gap in awareness, both from consumers knowing what technologies are out there that they could need or could use but also from companies being aware of the needs of older adults and people with disabilities. So that's once again why we try to really advance these conversations because we can see the way that just addressing this and including older adults in these discussions makes a massive difference in the opportunity for those technologies to help people.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Could you give me an example maybe of a company that is making it possible for an older worker to stay in the workplace a little bit longer?

Steve Ewell, CTA Foundation executive director:

Yeah. So I mean, one of the interesting things that I see now is all the... I mean, we're at CES this week. Everyone's talking AI right now. It's interesting to see the opportunities that are coming with generative AI. This is something I've been playing around with a little bit, and I'm continuing to explore because just... I mean, I know sometimes at the end of the day just creating that email or writing something that I'm just not... I'm brain-dead by the end of the day and looking at things like that, that you can just provide that little extra support now if not generating everything perfectly and just send it out, but it can do that first draft for you, which I've found really incredible and I think that's really something that could be beneficial.

We also see opportunities with transportation technologies. One of the challenges we find with older adults is being able to get to work and looking at different types of solutions, whether you're looking at public transit or whether you're looking at vehicle tech. We've got a ton of vehicle tech here at the show this week, but looking at some of those things that can help people get to where they're going and stay in the workforce in that way. And then just things, different types of interfaces, different types of being able to have text-to-speech or speech-to-text, which could certainly help if someone is having dexterity issues or other challenges. So there's a wide variety of different types of technologies that I see in this space.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And some of that technology, like AR, is also being used for training purposes.

Steve Ewell, CTA Foundation executive director:

Yes.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So if you need to be upskilled, then you can kind of do it in a virtual environment at first. So that-

Steve Ewell, CTA Foundation executive director:

Yep.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

... might be something that might be useful for older adults, I would imagine.

Steve Ewell, CTA Foundation executive director:

Absolutely. We've seen that. We've seen that both in more manual labor positions, but also seeing it's more on the disability side of our mission, but for people with cognitive disabilities using VR to give someone an opportunity to experience their office and walking around and where are different things that they... where's the lunchroom, where's the bathroom? Where are other things that they need to know?

And guess what? If you put on that VR goggles, you can run through it as many times as you want to feel comfortable with it outside of being in the office. And that way, when you get to the office, you're a little more comfortable doing that. I'm sure that could absolutely apply on the aging side as well.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And for people with disabilities, the idea that this technology could break down some barriers for hiring even. So not only hiring but retaining those workers, have you seen any great companies, or are there any great companies you want to talk about a little bit?

Steve Ewell, CTA Foundation executive director:

Yeah. I mean, I think we certainly see... Well, one, in more generality I'll say, we've seen the statistics around employees with disabilities are incredibly loyal. So companies that hire people with disabilities get incredible employees, and they retained them for quite a long time in many cases. So it's something we absolutely encourage companies to look at ways they can engage and employ more people with disabilities. Certainly, we see many of the companies that... Anyone who works with the government, there are certain percentages that they do. A lot of big companies.

We're seeing companies like Microsoft and MITRE and others along those lines have neurodiverse workforces. Was just talking earlier today on a stage with people from MITRE about their whole neurodiversity program and how it's not just about training the employees but also training the managers of those employees and really building the infrastructure around the employees to make sure that they can be successful in their jobs.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Something you said in that last answer, the idea that not only are managers being trained on how to deal with this, but coworkers are learning all about what they need to know to be able to understand this workforce that might not have been there before.

Steve Ewell, CTA Foundation executive director:

Yep. Oh, absolutely. And that it's interesting as we've been having more of these conversations. And whether you're talking about neurodiversity or even hearing loss or vision loss for so long, it was like, "Oh, here's your assistive software, good luck." But companies are really recognizing the opportunity by building that infrastructure around, they're able to make sure that their employees can be successful in their jobs.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And have you seen any new technology here that you're particularly excited about?

Steve Ewell, CTA Foundation executive director:

Well, I mean, I guess it's a question of excited just in general or excited specifically in this area. We have so many incredible startups over at Eureka Park that everything from over-the-counter hearing aids, that's a category I just think incredible because for so long it's been hard for people to get access to hearing help, and part of it is the cost and part of it is the stigma and part of it is just not wanting to go through the effort that it takes to get those devices.

So now we're actually just celebrating a little over a year that over-the-counter hearing aids have been on the market. We're able to have people get these devices, and it is not the exact same thing as a prescribed hearing aid, but for someone with mild to moderate hearing loss, it can be that bridge, and it can help them understand how hearing assistance can help. It can also help in very controlled environment. So you may not need a hearing aid 24/7, but if we're in a busy restaurant, I know when I'm in a busy restaurant half the time, I'm just trying to understand what the person across from me is saying.

So I think there's some really incredible technologies like that. There was a Concha Labs over there. We also saw EssilorLuxottica here. They have built an over-the-counter hearing aid into a pair of glasses that is looking at just different form factors. And evidently, it's really incredible. I haven't had a chance to try it yet, but based on others I've been talking to, I'm really looking forward to seeing that in action.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

We sent our crew over there too, and they were blown away by it. So I think something like Luxottica, and also these other over-the-counter hearing aids really have a good impact. And you know we talk about working... at WorkingNation, we talk about the workforce.

Steve Ewell, CTA Foundation executive director:

Yep.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

It can make it easier for someone to stay in a job longer or even access the job if they're able to take care of that one little issue.

Steve Ewell, CTA Foundation executive director:

Now, as so many people I've talked to who have said they just hid their hearing loss for years until it got to the point where they were on calls on meetings and realizing that they just had no idea what others were saying. And technology has gotten better. I mean, we have captions in Zoom and Teams and all those various systems, but it's still not quite the same. So yes, I absolutely see hearing assistance technology as being crucial for the workforce.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And if you had one message for everybody out there about the impact of technology, not only on people with disabilities or older people but just on our lives in general, what was that message?

Steve Ewell, CTA Foundation executive director:

I think technology, there's so much incredible innovation out there. Technology holds the promise to really improve lives across the board. There are challenges. I will absolutely agree with that. But when I meet these founders and look at the types of ideas that they're creating, the problems that they're trying to solve, I'm really a technology optimist for the opportunities that this technology can provide across work, home, and out at play.

The other piece that often gets ignored is, okay, you can live independently at home, and you can go to work, but if you don't have the opportunity to go out to a restaurant with friends, go to a movie, do other things like that, that's another opportunity for technology to really create those connections and create just that meaningful life that people can have.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

At Eureka Park, among the startups focused on using tech to increase access for people with disabilities was Making Space. The company is an accessible talent acquisition and learning experience platform that allows media companies to identify, train and access disabled, overlooked, and underrepresented talent pools. CEO Keely Cat-Wells talked with me at CES. She explained that she founded Making Space as a result of her own personal experience as a person with a hidden disability in the workforce.

Keely Cat-Wells, Making Space founder & CEO:

So we are a talent acquisition and learning experience platform for companies to identify, train, and access disabled talent.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

What made you want to be in this space?

Keely Cat-Wells, Making Space founder & CEO:

So this was never the plan originally. I was training to be a dancer in my teens, and then I became very unwell and then ended up spending a lot of my years in hospital. I got misdiagnosed, undiagnosed, and went through a lot of medical malpractice and trauma, and basically came out the other side of hospital as a disabled person. And I had never been in that space before. I had no idea what to expect, and I just started realizing that the world was so inaccessible.

So I live with chronic illness and a hidden disability. And then, when I moved to the US, I ended up getting a job within the entertainment industry. But after disclosing my disability and asking for accommodations and access requirements, I then got told I could no longer have that job. So that was the light bulb moment for me that I really wanted to do something and try and make sure that this doesn't happen to anyone else and just create a more equitable and accessible world for disabled people.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

What was the company's objections to offering an accommodation to someone who clearly needed to do their job?

Keely Cat-Wells, Making Space founder & CEO:

I think there are a lot of stereotypes around access requirements and accommodations and just misconceptions around accommodations. I think companies think that it's going to be very expensive, that it's going to be very laborious, that it's going to make the whole organization turn up on its head when usually it's just very small things that they can do to allow their employees to work better and more efficiently and more effectively.

So I think the first thing is just the fear of asking questions. I didn't get anyone asking me questions of what I might need or asking for more details on what it may be. It was just a flat-out, I think, fear. So it was like, no. And that's how a lot of people just don't get into the workforce because companies are so afraid to change the way and change the systems that they currently have in place.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I also think that employees or job seekers even are afraid to ask for those accommodations as well because they fear that they're going to hit what you hit, a roadblock, stopping them from having a job that they want.

Keely Cat-Wells, Making Space founder & CEO:

Oh, absolutely. Disabled people are terrified of disclosing, including myself because of all of the things that come with that. And also just the stereotypes and the stigmas that exist in society about disabled people. I come from the media and entertainment side, and oftentimes, within that space, disabled people are depicted of one of three things, villains, victims, or inspirations.

And that has led to society thinking that disabled people can, cannot do, certain things are scary, are inspiring for just going to the grocery store. And all of these misconceptions which has led to the workforce not employing disabled people and disabled people being terrified of disclosing and talking about disability. So that's one thing, in Making Space that we are working towards. So we have built a tool and a feature within our platform that turns our lived experience of disability into transferable skills and professional strengths.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So tell me how Making Space is making that space for people and making it not abnormal. That's what... Because the way you're talking about it is very true. People look at it as abnormal, whether it's good abnormal, or bad abnormal.

Keely Cat-Wells, Making Space founder & CEO:

Yeah. And I will say too quickly to the prior point, there are so many disabled people that you would have no idea were disabled. And I think we have this idea of what disability is, but we need to unlearn so many things that we have been taught that disability is supposed to be and not assume that disabled people can or cannot do certain things.

But also, I really hope that disabled people do feel more comfortable disclosing and that people who even have ADHD, diabetes, epilepsy, or who may have a medical condition but not identify as disabled do start to identify because then they can get access to more support. They can get access to accommodations and also community.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I think your point too, because you have a hidden disability, but that doesn't mean that if you got some help, and I mean help in the workplace, that you wouldn't be able to... It's not preventing you from doing your job is basically what I'm saying.

Keely Cat-Wells, Making Space founder & CEO:

Absolutely. I think, and my company, we work by the social model of disability, which is a way of approaching disability by saying, "I'm not disabled by my medical conditions. I'm disabled by the inaccessible society that we live in." And that's also why I use identity-first language because it's a political statement saying that I am disabled by society, so I'm a disabled person.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Tell me about the tools that you have available to someone who would like to look at your platform and get some help.

Keely Cat-Wells, Making Space founder & CEO:

Yeah. So I founded Making Space really with a passion of bridging certain skill gaps and getting disabled people into spaces that we've never really seen disabled people in before. And also providing the career mobility and career advancement opportunities for disabled people. Because as soon as disabled people have their hands on budgets and are in leadership positions, then change can accelerate. So we set it off by partnering with large companies like Netflix and NBC to create education that was specific to open roles that they have at the company. And it was to bridge very specific knowledge gaps.

So for instance, with Netflix, we worked on bridging the industry knowledge gap and get disabled people into the pipeline for that company. And now we've started to build additional features. So we are turning lived experience of disability into transferable skills and professional strengths because we really believe that if we change the narrative around disability and show companies in society that it's not a bad thing. That actually, because I live with a chronic illness and I have to manage my time and my energy and medical admin, that I actually have a ton of transferable skills, like adaptability and time management, and various other things that are actually very beneficial to the workforce.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

How is that being communicated to the employer? So if I was thinking, "Oh, I want to hire someone from this platform," or look for people, how are they being able to... So the minutiae of it. How is that-

Keely Cat-Wells, Making Space founder & CEO:

Yeah.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

... transferable information going out there?

Keely Cat-Wells, Making Space founder & CEO:

Yeah. So currently, and this is just version one of what we currently have if you can imagine the dropdown that you usually have on a self-identification form. So for instance, with disability, you have yes, no, prefer not to say. We also have a yes, no, and I'm not sure.

So anyone who clicks yes or I'm not sure will be prompted to talk about their lived experience about the barriers that they face in society about their history. And this is obviously all private and confidential information that our AI tool would then break down into the certain skills that they can also then validate on the platform through the training and education. But those skills will live on their profile and be visible to the employers.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And how is the network partnership working? What are they partnering on? You said it for jobs that are available.

Keely Cat-Wells, Making Space founder & CEO:

Yeah. So both the jobs that are available and also any internal promotions and career advancement opportunities within the company. Something that I was very passionate about was making sure that our solution didn't get deprioritized as soon as budgets got cut within corporations. So we are helping companies with retention, just talent recruitment in general, but also helping them save time and energy when it comes to that process and just helping them find better-fitting candidates for the open positions.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Do I recall in a conversation we had that graphic artist was one of the positions that you were working with them for?

Keely Cat-Wells, Making Space founder & CEO:

Yeah, we-

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Yeah.

Keely Cat-Wells, Making Space founder & CEO:

Yeah. We did a really awesome partnership with Netflix, specifically for graphic designers, and we have had hundreds of graphic designers go through the education and training and are now in the pipeline and currently being evaluated by Netflix to hopefully start getting some jobs.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And is it that they go in and they go through the training so they know what's going to happen or what is needed to do this job, and then once they... are they proving something to the employer that they are able to do the job?

Keely Cat-Wells, Making Space founder & CEO:

Yeah. It's we speak about it in kind of pre-qualification terms, but we're also giving talent the opportunity to know the ins and outs of what it's going to be like to work at that company. And for disabled people, it's really awesome for them to be able to know what accommodations they could potentially get at that company and the talent. Andy Lerma, who's the creative design lead at Netflix, he taught this course on the platform. And he's disabled, and he talked about his experience as a disabled person at Netflix.

And we found so many disabled people say, "Wow, I would never have seen myself in that position. I never thought that that career path was available to me. But seeing Andy talk about his experiences and talk about his journey at Netflix makes me want to now go down that career path and apply for this role." So we really feel confident that we're starting to untap some amazing talent that had never even thought of applying for those positions before.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Tell me about the NBC program that you've put together.

Keely Cat-Wells, Making Space founder & CEO:

Yeah. So we were very excited to partner with NBC Universal and NBC Sports to specifically create training and education for hosts and to create education for roles that are open for the Paris 2024 broadcasting of the Olympics and Paralympics. So we hosted some training. We filmed it in Stanford, Connecticut, which is their big studio. We brought disabled talent to the studio, filmed it, and it's going to be on our platform shortly.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

That's wonderful. It really is wonderful because it's nice to have that representation in a sport that is highlighting the Paralympics.

Keely Cat-Wells, Making Space founder & CEO:

Yeah.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

It's fantastic. So there are the barriers, and there are the roadblocks and the preconceived notions on folks that have disabilities, hidden or not.

Keely Cat-Wells, Making Space founder & CEO:

Mm-hmm.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

How do you think technology, in general, has been able to help broaden the talent pool and making these jobs more accessible to people with the disabilities?

Keely Cat-Wells, Making Space founder & CEO:

Yeah, technology has been huge. I think even if we just look at Apple and what they've been able to provide with their assistive technology on the iPhone, it's game-changing the access that disabled people can have and also what you can view on that technology. I mean, I'm so passionate about the way that media and entertainment can shift perspectives and create access and create more equity within society.

So even being able to have social media and seeing yourselves in different positions that you've never even imagined that you could be in before is really powerful. And I'm very excited about AI and what it can also do for the disabled community, even being here at CES and where we are, where our booth is in Eureka Park, and seeing the solutions that people are creating. It's amazing.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And if somebody wanted to read more about your company, where do they go?

Keely Cat-Wells, Making Space founder & CEO:

They can go to making-space.com, or they can also look us up on LinkedIn, which is just Making Space.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You've been listening to some of my conversations from CES 2024, this one with Keely Cat-Wells, founder and CEO of Making Space, and Steve Ewell, executive director of the Consumer Technology Association Foundation, about how tech is helping advance accessibility. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of WorkingNation. Thanks for listening.