

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.

TechForce Foundation is a nationwide nonprofit dedicated to technical education and workforce development for professional technicians across all sectors. It is my pleasure to welcome CEO, Jennifer Maher to the podcast. Jennifer, thank you for taking the time to talk to me.

Jennifer Maher, TechForce Foundation CEO:

My pleasure. Thanks for having me.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

I'm going to start out with a broad question. You say, all sectors and we are talking about professional technicians. Describe what that means. Tell me what that means, who we're talking about here?

Jennifer Maher, TechForce Foundation CEO:

Yes. When we talk about all sectors, we're talking about automobiles, airplanes, trucks, motorcycles, boats, race cars, anything that moves, even stationary engines. They all need skilled qualified technicians to keep them moving. And so we have our motto at TechForce that says, "When Techs Rock America Rolls!"

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

I love how you talk about that also. You mentioned something, I was reading your website and you mentioned, "We know what a strut is and it's not a dance."

Jennifer Maher, TechForce Foundation CEO:

That's right. We know a MacPherson strut is not a dance move.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

I love it.

Jennifer Maher, TechForce Foundation CEO:

And I think it's because technicians really have their own language. Car people tend to have their own language and they take pride in that. And it's a community. And when you like to wrench or you're a gearhead and all that type of lingo, it makes up a really wonderful community to be a part of.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

And these are the people that basically keep us all going and keeping our economy moving. And I noticed something in one of your annual reports and it was talking about how the growth in the technician workforce has outpaced the overall labor force for the first time. That's pretty remarkable.

Jennifer Maher, TechForce Foundation CEO:

It is. And I mean, when you look at the entire transportation industry, which is when we say all sectors, that's what we're really adding up, of everything that's moving. And as that evolves, not only now is it

automobiles as we would traditionally think, but now it's the autonomous vehicles, electric vehicles. It's drones. It's charging stations. So this idea of transportation is giving way to a new word that you're hearing floating, which is the future of mobility. And we don't mean mobility from a wheelchair standpoint. It is the fact that transportation is going to be even more about making things mobile and not just getting point A to point B. So this whole future of mobility is exploding, maybe perhaps more than some of the other skilled trades even, as far as the evolution and the advancements of the technology. And then hence too, the skill set needed to really work on the vehicles of the future, today and tomorrow.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

That includes the emerging technology that's in there. So a lot of times we think of technicians and some of the fields you mentioned automotive, aviation, diesel. People still have that idea that they are like "dirty jobs".

Jennifer Maher, TechForce Foundation CEO:

They do, yes. Yes. There's still the outdated stigma of the shade tree mechanic or the grease monkey. And yes, there's wrenching, and yes, there's oil and lubricants and things, but it is so much more of a STEM career today. The science, technology, engineering and math, the circuitry and the math that goes into things, the computer and the diagnostics, the calibration and the safety and the advanced safety systems that are in cars or vehicles now, that autonomous the electrical. You can't just lift your hood and work on most vehicles today. Right. And the sensors and the computers or the hybrids and the electricity, you've got to be trained and skilled. So where we are today and where we're going is such an advancement that we say these are STEM careers and they're no longer blue collar, but new collar careers.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

And because of all this emerging technology that you've mentioned, we need a workforce to fill those jobs and there is a big demand for them. So how are you at TechForce Foundation, how are you helping all of us out there prepare that workforce?

Jennifer Maher, TechForce Foundation CEO:

Well, I think COVID gave us the term of essential workers, that there are certain jobs that have to keep going to keep us all rolling. And so of course the technician remains an essential job and we all need to get to work, to get to school, to get groceries to our shelves. We need to be moving products and things all over the world, and we still want to take our vacations and/or fly from here to there. So in the end of the day, we are spoiled rotten on how much mobility impacts our daily lives. So that's the type of thing that, imagine the world without techs and how different it would be if everything came to a grinding halt. And that is why we advocate for this profession and for the industry because we need them. In the end of the day not everybody always wants to champion their students or their young people into these careers because of those old outdated stigmas.

And they go, "What do you want to do that for?" And it's like, "Well, because you can actually make really good money these days because they are advancing. They're cool, and it's a wonderful industry." So you don't know what you don't know. So TechForce does an annual supply and demand report that we put out and that anybody can download for free from our website, but it does show the gap between what the demand is and how many students are coming out of the training schools. And that gap is going to leave you and me waiting on the tarmac for maintenance to show up because there's an

issue if there's a shortage or it's going to have us waiting weeks to get our car if it's been in a collision or a crash, repaired and back on the road, or just waiting to get our basic services.

And I don't want to wait because again, I need my freedom and I need my mobility. So these are things that we are working to say, number one, we have to tell the story about how this profession has changed and what are the opportunities and how this is a right fit for many. It's not for everybody, but we also believe that not every kid needs to go off to a four-year university and ought to be a lawyer to be successful. So it is about giving people choices and letting people who love problem-solving and this technology and taking it apart and putting it back together. And they're just people who have that tactile intelligence, that this is a perfect career fit for them and they're often not sure what to do because the school system has said, "Sit still, don't move. Listen to me, don't get out of your chair."

And that's not how they learn. And we hear from them all the time, "I don't want a desk job. I don't want that. I don't want four more years of academia. So what are my choices?" So we need to tell the story to help them have those choices. Number two, is like I kind of said before, you can't just lift the hood and work anymore on cars. They're sophisticated, so you have to have some exposure and experience. Young people aren't in the garage working with dad or grandpa anymore, so now it's kind of out of sight, out of mind. So just taking them out to races and rallies and car shows and we just see them light up. Not everybody, but when you see that kid light up at the roar of an engine or something, it's just who they are, it's in them. So why not let them live a passion like that?

And then we have to help them get through that journey, that if they pursue this career ... Young people, we always say, "They don't know what they don't know, and the moms and dads don't know what they don't know." So if they don't know there's a technical school in their community where they could maybe go or open enroll, then they didn't know they had that choice. If they don't know how to find scholarships like TechForce giving away \$4 million a year, then they don't even know to apply. So it's kind of creating that scholarship system to help them with those financial burdens, but it's also creating what we call our TechForce network, TechForce, a one-stop shop online, find all the links to all these resources that you didn't know exist, and that's our job as a nonprofit to be the connector. Here's everything we can find for you that can help you.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

Are you creating your own programs like workforce development programs? Are you stepping in to help them reach a bigger audience?

Jennifer Maher, TechForce Foundation CEO:

Yes. I think in the nonprofit world, we're referred to as an intermediary. In the normal human lingo, I say we're a connector, right? So imagine us as this hub, a connector or the wheel. And so yes, we have our scholarship and grant program. We have the student experience program where we work with schools to take them on field trips or homeschoolers can sign up on our website to go out to that Mecum Auction or a Formula DRIFT race. We have the storytelling that anybody can access, but we don't create curriculum to train a student on being an aviation tech. That is already out there and there are schools that specialize in that, but we connect you to help find them.

We have our scholarships, but there's others out there, so maybe somebody can get more than one. So we connect to all of those. We work with people who are experts in the field, but it is our job to connect with the government agencies that care about workforce development and to represent this sector, this profession. We often find that sometimes transportation isn't at the table and maybe construction is, or healthcare is. Well, why isn't mobility at the table? So we always want to be that voice, but then even

with being at the table, we stay in our lane, which is around the technician workforce because it's massive in and of itself. So that's where we focus our expertise on that portion of the skilled trade.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

If someone wanted to learn about technician careers and it's not being taught in their school for whatever reason, you have the TechForce Career platform, tell us how people can access and then what they might find there.

Jennifer Maher, TechForce Foundation CEO:

Yeah. So just think TechForce, where are our future and aspiring technicians? They're at TechForce, the technician workforce. That's why I named it what I named it. And so you just go to techforce.org, .org being a charity on the very landing page, it says, "Join Now", and that's where you just create your account and anybody can do it. So you can as a media partner or an industry professional, but students, instructors, working professionals. But our main target audience obviously is the aspiring student tech and or the working tech and the community that then surrounds them and wants to support them, but they create their account for free. Two-factor authentication. You get in, you create your account, but then you can really start having fun in there. And it is gamified. It's designed by Gen Z for Gen Z. So it's all about you can earn points by engaging. So come to a race with us, come to a Formula DRIFT, come to a Mecum Auction, look for a school.

Use a filter and look in Indiana, look in Arizona and find out what tech schools are there. High school as well as post-secondary, look for scholarships. Maybe you're just curious. We've got trivia, we've got contests. You can win prizes, you can win tools, you can take little mini trainings, because again, we're not a school, but our partners are giving us some of the best teaser curriculum that you might just watch 15 minutes on how to change an air filter or something about brakes or ADAS calibration. And you're going, "Oh, this is interesting."

So again, it's a way for you to say, "This intrigues me, or I'm bored stiff. This is not for me." But if you're intrigued, then it's fun things like the trivia where you can Stump Attack or Name That Sound. And it's just going to keep your appetite growing. But that's where you can then as you go through the journey, maybe you're only in high school or middle school, there's only so much you're going to be doing then, but all of a sudden you start to be a senior in high school, you want to apply for those scholarships or maybe you're ready for an apprenticeship or you're finishing your post-secondary and you're looking for an apprenticeship or job. So we take you from start to finish from building the pipeline and doing that journey all the way to job placement because we don't have a dog in the fight as a charity. We're just here for that success of that aspiring technician and to make that dream come true. But we recognize that there's a lot of potholes that they may fall into throughout that journey, and we want to help them be successful.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

So you're mentioning scholarships a couple of times, and those scholarships have had a profound impact on people's career, their lives. Give me a couple stories. I mean, what you've already told me makes me want to go look at the website and figure out, do I want to do this? I may be a little too late in my career to change, but who knows?

Jennifer Maher, TechForce Foundation CEO:

Never too late. Never.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

Never too late, right? But tell me about some of how the scholarships have helped people. Give me some stories.

Jennifer Maher, TechForce Foundation CEO:

Well, I mean, it could be a veteran, so I often refer to everybody as a kid, but the reality is we help people of all ages, who are adults changing careers later in life. But here's an example of a veteran. And so you've got Jose, and he had returned from deployment, had worked on billions of dollars of equipment while he was deployed, but he comes home and he can't touch your Kia because our systems are that he has to go back to school and get all these certifications in order to be able to be hired. Okay, that's fine. And then he's got the VA loans. So he often doesn't need help with tuition, but there are things like the housing allowance that don't kick in for six to eight weeks until after a vet has started school.

So we have hundreds of vets applying to us for our emergency grants, because during that six to eight week hiatus, that gap, they're living in their car in Chicago in the winter. So they need some assistance to get them into a motel or some short-term housing so that they can, not be so cold and not be living in their cars. And we want to be able to do that for our veterans. We also have young people who just need the financial help. So I think of Chris and I met Chris at TechForce when she was 16 years old. She was in a high school automotive program. She was an ambassador for SkillsUSA. She said, "I have a dream of becoming an auto tech." And I said, "Let's make that happen." She ended up applying for our scholarships, and she won one of our outstanding, called the NASCAR Brienne Davis Award, and it was a \$10,000 tuition scholarship. It helped her to go to the school that she wanted to go to and graduate.

She stayed with TechForce and came back and said, "My dream is to work for Tesla." We had a board member, we made some introductions. Lo and behold, she went to work for Tesla to have a good career there and then she advanced and is now with Lucid as a mobile technician working on the electric vehicles. And ... saw her a couple of weeks ago, and she just glows and has become now a volunteer ambassador for us and is paying it forward to others. And that's a 10-year later, she's now 26. And so it's just a point of pride that she'll stand on any stage at any time and say, "Without that scholarship, without the introductions and the connections that we helped, she might have floundered."

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

I love that one of your examples is a woman, and sometimes we think of tech jobs, these hands-on tech jobs as male dominated. I would imagine that you have a pretty fair percentage of women in the field.

Jennifer Maher, TechForce Foundation CEO:

Yes. And that is because of those stigmas and stereotypes. But it was real, right? I mean, in the end of the day, less than 3% of all technicians across the sectors are women. In automotive it's about 12% are women, but that doesn't represent the population. So it's clearly still dominated by men. But we are working to change that. Lots of people are working to change that. I think the good news is you're starting to see an increase. We, one, have been launched our Women Techs Rock initiative for the last several years, where we're always showing and interviewing women techs like Chris, right? And, "You've got to see it to be it", as a Billie Jean King would once say. So to see videos of successful women techs makes you want to aspire and go, "Oh wait, there is somebody who looks like me." The second thing is those scholarships earmarking some to make sure that we get more women in tech schools.

Because again, if you're the only one female in a class of all men, we have seen what arise, is called self-doubt, which is not that you can't do it, but when you're the only one, you start to think, "Maybe I don't belong here." And that can be overwhelming. So again, having a network of mentors and others that they can talk to, really important. So I do think that you're starting to see that. And with the advances of technology, some of the old lifting or workload is getting lightened. There's more lifts and machines to lift the tires, to lift different aspects of it. And as we joke, women and diversity always brings more brain power and smaller hands sometimes and more creativity. And so we really want that diverse workforce.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

Your passion for this is so obvious. What sparked it? What made you want to do this?

Jennifer Maher, TechForce Foundation CEO:

Yeah. Well, I've been in 30 years in non-profit, so I always have wanted to use my talents and my skills to do good in the world. But in particular for this, I'm also a mama bear. And I know what it's like to have had a kid in school, and as I said earlier, "Sit still, don't move. What's wrong with you?" And it's like there's nothing wrong with them. It's just sometimes our traditional systems don't work for everybody. And so I get pretty passionate about being able to make sure there's choices and options in education and in workforce for different types of people. We're all wired differently and none of it is bad. It's just different. And so I want to celebrate people who can keep fixing things and want to have this bring their tactile intelligence and to let them know that there are pathways that need them.

And as a Mike Rowe would say, "For 30 years, we bashed the skill trades and we destroyed them, the school programs, but the pendulum's swinging." And I think now after all of this time, we're starting to realize as a society that we've done ourselves a disservice. And so for me, that is a personal passion of being that mama bear for these students and for the people who think differently. Amen. But also I think from a societal standpoint, it's a cause that matters. It's a cause sometimes that we haven't spent enough time talking about. If I spent 30 years in non-profit, I've seen everything from the obesity epidemic to everything turning pink for breast cancer. We kind of call them cause de jures. But I really do believe that this is a cause de jure that is rising right now. What have we done with technical education? What are we doing with the skilled trades? And we need to pay attention and give them as much kudos as we give other pathways.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

Very well put. And you're about to launch a fundraising campaign, which I like, which is, "Imagine a world and how it'd be different without technicians."

Jennifer Maher, TechForce Foundation CEO:

Exactly.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

What would our world be like without them?

Jennifer Maher, TechForce Foundation CEO:

Yeah. Imagine your world without techs. Imagine your car doesn't move, that you don't have one, that it's just sits idle. You'd be walking a lot, you'd be carrying your kids to soccer with all the gear on your back. You would not be as mobile to be able to jump around the world on an airplane. You would be

going to the stores and the things would be coming locally, because it's what could be pulled in a push cart or moved because nothing's moving except for what you can move yourself. So the engines, all of those stationary engines running your power plants, I mean, there's gears in this country, in this world that are keeping everything the way we're used to living and yet, out of sight, out of mind. And it's easy to trash those people who you don't notice are really doing some of the hard, incredible work that's now very sophisticated and talented that you rely on.

So we are always a non-profit and we're always fundraising. So accepting donations anytime, go to techforce.org. But sometimes you have to really clamor or rattle the bell every so often to say, "Hey, remember us." And so this April, that is our annual support where we often tell our friends and family, we'll only bug you once a year, but if once a year you would think of this issue and just throw something into the till. Then all boats rise. It's kind of the McDonald hamburger theory, is if everybody threw in a buck, we'd have a billion bucks. But it does take money for any cause to be successful. So for us to have the scholarship dollars to give away, we're going to give away \$4 million in 2024, which is a lot, thank goodness. But it's still only awarding one in every four applications we have. So these students have need, and we want to be able to fulfill that need, and that's why we need our donors.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

So that's techforce.org, check them out. I think you'll find some really incredible stuff there. And these folks are the ones, as Jennifer has said, keep us moving.

Jennifer Maher, TechForce Foundation CEO:

That's right.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

So Jennifer, thank you very much for taking the time to talk with me on the Work in Progress podcast.

Jennifer Maher, TechForce Foundation CEO:

Thanks for caring about this issue.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

I've been speaking with Jennifer Maher. She's the CEO of TechForce Foundation. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor in chief of WorkingNation. Thank you for listening.