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.

Will artificial intelligence replace people in the workforce or will AI unlock economic opportunity for workers and the human potential in all of us? That was a big conversation at The Human Potential Summit in Denver earlier this fall. GitLab Foundation is on a mission to increase lifetime earnings for people through education, training and access to opportunities.

President and CEO Ellie Bertani spoke at the summit on the impact so far of AI and whether it is helping or hurting workers. She sat down with me right after appearing on stage. We started our conversation with Bertani's take on whether or not employers are implementing AI effectively for their companies or their employees.

Ellie Bertani, GitLab Foundation president & CEO:

Well, we don't know that they're doing it right, but we know that there a set of common mistakes that many companies and organizations tend to make when they start working with AI, and that those mistakes are avoidable and preventable if you know enough upfront. So, one of the things we cited on stage at The Human Potential Summit today was this recent RAND study that canvassed hundreds and hundreds of business leaders who have been attempting to use AI to solve various problems over the past few years since it was first launched, and some of the problems are incredibly common.

The number one issue that organizations run into as they try to experiment with this technology is a lack of clarity on what the problem is to be solved, and you see this in the business environment and you see this in the nonprofit environment. It's very, very easy to have miscommunication about what you're actually trying to achieve, and in the second point that the RAND article made, whether or not AI is actually the right tool to meet the need, right?

Some people get really excited by the potential of AI in general, the flashy, shiny object, and we try to apply it now to so many different scenarios where it may not be the best fit. Sometimes a fancy spreadsheet is enough to solve the type of problem you're trying to get to, but this issue of miscommunication, particularly when you have technical expert who understand the technology, but don't understand the business problem or the social problem, miscommunicating with the experts who are on the front lines of the business working with customers or with nonprofits working with clients. If you don't have them at the table really clearly articulating the problem in all its nuance, then it's very, very difficult for the technologist to actually meet the needs effectively.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I think that saying that you have AI is something that businesses are saying, because it's very important that everybody feels like they're on the cutting edge. So this idea that people are failing at the initiatives or projects that they're doing makes sense, because they haven't had a chance to think it through.

So as someone who is investing, some of your portfolio companies or some of your grantees are in AI, what are you looking for to make sure you're putting your money where it maybe do the best good?

Ellie Bertani, GitLab Foundation president & CEO:

So we have a framework we use, different criteria we look for when we do due diligence on any investment or grantee in the AI space. Part of it is a recognition that many nonprofits in particular don't have internal technical expertise, and so we often look for a strong partner, a trusted experienced

partner, be it a for-profit that they might be working with or a university or someone that brings that technical credibility to the table.

Governance. How they're setting up the governance structures is really, really important if you have a partner at the table, and then we look for things like ethical use of AI. Are they aware of some of the risks inherent in biased data or privacy issues that need to be accounted for? We ask the questions and then judge the level of expert fluency and sophistication of the answers, because those are really important factors in whether or not whatever they build is fit for market and for public use without inadvertently causing harm.

Those are just some of the things we look for. We also scale the size of our grants based on risk, so if we feel like it's a newer team, if we like the idea, we'll still fund it, we'll just give them a smaller amount, and then if they do well, we'll give them more. So if it's a more experienced team or maybe a technology-facing organization, we may have higher confidence and give them a bigger grant. So, we also think about the risk level when we're making our investments.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Looking at some of the companies, organizations that you are granting money to, what have you found that you think is encouraging or that you really think, oh, this is for the good of everyone?

Ellie Bertani, GitLab Foundation president & CEO:

Yeah, I will say, first of all, I'm excited about a lot of the first of 13 grantees that we funded in our first AI for Economic Opportunity Fund. As you know, we're about to launch our second fund as well, and I think the main categories of usage that we're seeing fall into two main buckets.

One is the potential for nonprofits in the public sector to use AI simply to improve their operational efficiency, to streamline their back office services, to maybe help case managers with a bot that provides them information that then they can act on more quickly and have the ability to reach more people and serve more clients at a lower cost. So we see lots of examples of that, and that excites us, even though it sounds a little mundane, because it stretches more of every dollar than a nonprofit is using and allows them to serve more people, and there's always so much need.

The second place that we see this is actual tools being built to address economic disparities. A great example of this in our portfolio is EdTech for Learning, which is an organization that serves the Navajo Nation that's built basically a job matching tool to give visibility to jobs that may not be visible, that people may not be aware of in the tribal nation. High-paying or good living wage jobs, there are 3,500 in the Navajo Nation right now, these unclaimed jobs and this new job matching tool helps candidates assess their own skills, get access to free upskilling and find the jobs and have a great match. So, this is a great common example of a type of tool that can really have a direct impact on economic mobility.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

For GitLab's Foundation, what is your main focus? Is it education? Is it education to career? How would you describe what your mission is?

Ellie Bertani, GitLab Foundation president & CEO:

Yeah, our mission is actually broad, but pretty straightforward. It is to help people increase their lifetime earnings through access to opportunities. We care about one thing and one thing only, which is for every dollar that we grant out, we want to see at least $100 end up in the bank accounts or in the pockets of the people that we're trying to serve.

The great thing about that mission is that it gives us a lot of freedom. There are lots of ways to improve people's economic benefits from training and education to job placement, but also things like we're starting to explore issues around health, issues around disability, issues around wealth building and financial security, which we know then leads to more economic mobility.

So the risk is we try to go too broad, but the exciting things is there are innovations in all of those areas, many of which have out-sized impact, right? 100X, 1,000X potential results, and because we uniquely just care about this one metric, we can analyze all of these different opportunities using a common framework and make good decisions we hope on where we place our bets.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

At The Human Potential Summit, part of the conversation is around putting people at the center of the full conversation, this ecosystem that exists out there around education and work. Where do you think we could improve that? How can we as a whole group talk about this better and make it more effective?

Ellie Bertani, GitLab Foundation president & CEO:

Ooh, that's a good question. For me, I think what I've always felt for a long time in my career is many of these issues we're trying to tackle are quite complex and actually can't be tackled by one sector or one organization alone. I think there's a tremendous amount of good work being done in lots and lots of individual organizations around the country in employers, large employers, small employers within the nonprofit sector and different government agencies and at the state level, but there continues to be a lack of coordination and conversation across the sectors, and it's really important and really powerful.

If the private sector really wants to play a role in advancing economic mobility, it needs to start acting differently and probably learning from and partnering with the public and nonprofit sectors to address disparities and populations that it doesn't normally try to work with. The nonprofit sector really wants to work well to get underserved people great jobs as one example, they need to understand how to work effectively with the business sector, which is solving a business problem.

If any of us want to work effectively with public officials, we have to remember that public officials need to be elected, and therefore we need to celebrate the successes so that they get visibility and there's momentum around the work. So, it's partly about understanding the incentive that drive and the interest that drive each of these different components, but together we can attack the most complex problems collectively.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I think there's a lack of awareness that there is opportunity out there, and I think that is fueling people's feeling of discontent and people feeling that they're being left behind. So not making this a political statement, I'm just saying I think that's just a human nature statement. How do we change that equation? Do you have any thoughts on that?

Ellie Bertani, GitLab Foundation president & CEO:

I like this question, and I've been thinking about it since you mentioned it a little bit earlier. I think we need to understand ... the way I try to tackle problems like this is really trying to understand where people are getting their information, right? I have to assume that there's a set of people who are motivated to improve their lives, and if so, where are they trying to go as a first stop to get information about opportunities? Are they doing a Google search? Are they going to a local job board? Are they talking to a friend?

If we know the facts of how people are trying to gather their information, we can much more effectively drive awareness and get the message out that, hey, manufacturing jobs are resurgent in your areas, or green jobs in the solar industry are looking for people like you and you can get free training.

I think your point is really important. I think probably different people look in different places, but there are probably common spots that we should be channeling. More communication, more awareness, more advertising, frankly, so that people understand that there's really a world of opportunity out there. Particularly at this moment in time, there's a lot of investments in good jobs that are accessible through non-traditional pathways.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Thank you, Ellie.

Ellie Bertani, GitLab Foundation president & CEO:

Great to see you, Ramona. Thank you.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

That was Ellie Bertani, GitLab Foundation President and CEO. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, Editor-in-Chief of WorkingNation. Thanks for listening.