

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. As we begin the new year, we want to spend our very first podcast of 2021 talking about the American worker. WorkingNation recently released the findings of our first American Workers' Survey, and joining me now to discuss the results are Art Bilger, founder and CEO of WorkingNation, and Frank Luntz, president of FIL Incorporated. And Frank was the one who did the survey for us. Thank you both for being here.

Art Bilger, WorkingNation founder and CEO:

This is Art. I'm delighted to be here with you and Frank. Thank you very much for providing the opportunity.

Frank Luntz, FIL Incorporated president:

It's my pleasure, so thank you.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Art, I want to talk to you first. WorkingNation has been around for almost five years now, and our mission, as we talk about here all the time, is to tell stories that will help people find the skills and the training that they need for jobs now and in the future. So, give me a little bit of an assessment, where you see [we're at 00:00:01:12] right now in 2021. And we'll get to some of the details of the survey in just a moment.

Art Bilger, WorkingNation founder and CEO:

Well, Ramona, as you know, we've been thinking about these issues of workforce changes that are the result of, in my mind, four things coming together like never before in history. And that is globalization, technology, longevity, units of labor staying in the workforce much longer, and then challenging education. What's happened is, courtesy of the pandemic, I think this has all accelerated quite dramatically. And that's why, as we go into 2021, I think it's imperative that the people of this country, at all levels, be much more educated as to where the jobs of the future will be, and the mitigating strategies and solutions.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Frank, one of the things that struck me most about the survey is the number of people who are actually concerned and worried about skills obsolescence. They're afraid they don't have the skills they need. So, take me through a little bit of what you found in the survey.

Frank Luntz, FIL Incorporated president:

Well, it's an understanding, and it's an accurate understanding that life has changed, and the world has changed, and they're going to have to live in a new world. They can't wish it away. They've got to be prepared for it. From automation, to outsourcing, to globalization, all three of those are on the minds of the workforce, and they see all three of them as working against them as they try to keep up with the changes. And so, any policy, any solution to this will require at least an acceptance of, and a mitigation of those three components, or is doomed to fail. Workers expect, they want to be at the forefront of the

American economy, and they want to be respected and appreciated, but they genuinely need help. And that's one of the reasons why they are nervous, they're afraid of the future.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

One of the numbers in the survey was 40% of the people fear that they don't have the skills they need to stay relevant and to be competitive. So, Art, I want to start with you, and then, Frank, you can jump in, but who is responsible for making sure that we are preparing the workforce?

Art Bilger, WorkingNation founder and CEO:

I believe it really spreads across society at all levels. Educating 330 million people with obviously very different backgrounds, it takes many different organizations, starting with government in terms of providing some insights into where the world is going. But then it's really at the more local level, I think, which companies, it's not-for-profits, it's academic entities, it's local government who really are, I think, the parties who should be responsible for one, further educating the population, but two, also developing the solutions to move the people in this country along the theme of lifelong learning, because that is really what we are going to be focusing on in this country over the decades. Lifelong learning is going to be a major theme, whether it's you, Frank, myself, people at other ends of spectrums, everyone's going to be having to follow through in a lifelong learning structure.

Frank Luntz, FIL Incorporated president:

And it's not just, to add to that, and Art, you're correct. The numbers, they're truth to the fact that the public trust their local leaders much more than slightly less so their state leaders, and much less so their federal leaders. They see this as a responsibility and they look towards their local and state leaders to provide them that assistance. But it's not just about skills. One of the most interesting questions to me is when we ask them, "What matters most to you at this point in your life?" And it wasn't that their family is proud of them, or that their work has purpose or impact, or even job security, which is what we assumed, or that they make a lot of money. The number one priority right now is that they have a good work-life balance.

Frank Luntz, FIL Incorporated president:

And that's telling because our system, our economic system, is changing and our priorities are changing. And the only way that you can have a good work-life balance is if you have the skills and the confidence in your work life to give you the time for your private life. And I think that's a reason, a major reason why so many people are nervous, uncomfortable, and frankly have a bad outlook towards the future.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So, Frank, what role should employers be playing here? How should they be helping workers get skills that they need and have that balance in their personal lives?

Frank Luntz, FIL Incorporated president:

That's a great question. From the public standpoint, you're correct again, that they do expect it to come from their businesses, and they would like their employer to be more engaged in providing the skills and having these conversations. I think another great surprise is that no one, when they were younger, talked to them about the skills they would need, that they did not have these conversations with their parents or teachers. And now as adults, that they're not having these conversations at their places of work, that we got a lot of questions as a ever-changing society, not enough answers, which is why this

research and WorkingNation are so essential. And I'm not here to do a plug, I'm here to state a fact. If there aren't people to help, then tens of millions of Americans are going to be, frankly, just shipwrecked, out at sea, without a direction, and without a purpose.

Art Bilger, WorkingNation founder and CEO:

Ramona, to your question about employers, I do believe employers should be taking the lead here, and for one very practical reason. They have the greatest visibility as to changes in their businesses, how they're seeing whatever the changes might be. And so, their information, now, you [make that they 00:07:23] pass it on to some academic institution or a not-for-profit that could help them facilitate the up-skilling of workers. But I really do believe employers have the greatest advantage in terms of visibility of changes that are coming.

Frank Luntz, FIL Incorporated president:

And if I can add to that, there is a set of words that follows what Art just said. And the public, when we ask them, and I'm going to put it together for you, it's a 25 second pitch for what the American people want. "Having a good career is essential in achieving the good life, yet globalization, automation, and outsourcing threatened millions of American careers, and they aren't going away." And then they would look towards the corporation and say, "So, let's make a genuine commitment to lifelong learning that leads to the enjoyable rewarding career you want, the stable financial security you need, and the healthy work life balance you deserve." That in actually a 21-second statement is exactly what the American people are looking for.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

One of the other findings you have goes to that idea that going to bed every night feeling financially secure is the American dream, and bringing that all together could really help you get that.

Frank Luntz, FIL Incorporated president:

Well, I'll answer that because the way it describes, and it's very depressing, is that as you get into bed and your eyes close for the last time and you begin to drift off, is your final thought how are you going to put food on the table for you and your family? Is your final thought, how are you going to pay the bills at the end of the week? I don't wish that on anybody. The idea that the moment before you go to sleep is a moment of fear and peril. And that's why it is so important that people have that sense of stability, of protection, of predictability. And that is the number one definition of the American dream or living the middle-class life is that sense of feeling financially secure.

Frank Luntz, FIL Incorporated president:

And I wish that our elected officials and our business leaders could talk about it in those emotional terms, bringing it home, giving a real life metaphor, or explanation, for what this really means. The problem is, our business people way too often talk in numbers and statistics that are cold, and in some cases, meaningless. And our politicians forget that they're really there not just to represent, but in some cases, to support the constituents who depend on them. And that's why I love that phrase, going to bed each night feeling financially secure, how important that is in this entire study of the American workforce.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And on the flip side of that, the majority of workers that you spoke to are optimistic. They believe they can still get a middle-class lifestyle, that they're able to achieve it through work.

Frank Luntz, FIL Incorporated president:

Well, unfortunately, however, the American dream is now the lowest priority. Middle-class lifestyle is higher, which is a year-to-year thing. And living the good life, which is a day-to-day thing, is higher still. That the American dream now for an increasing number of people is out of their reach. And I believe, going back to WorkingNation, I believe that if you don't have the skills to function, if you don't have the talents for what we will need, not today, but what we're going to need next year and the year after that, then there's no way for you to stay in the middle class. There's no way for you to reach your American dream. We don't have a choice. We have to act, we have to do it together and we have to do it now.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Art, I want to bring back in the idea of lifelong learning, because one of the things that we found in the survey is that people believe that being certified in a tech or trade school is critical for them to achieve their goal of a career. So, this could happen at any time in their lives. And fewer believe that higher education, a BA or BS, is critical at all. So, what are you hearing when you're talking to people about the role that education is playing in up-skilling and in career paths?

Art Bilger, WorkingNation founder and CEO:

It really varies quite broadly. And I do believe it's actually changing quite a bit during these times that we're living through today. Once upon a time, four year college was clearly the goal for so many, but one of the issues that we found in recent years was the lack of employability following an education like that. And so, when you start talking about lifelong learning, it's really many components to it taking place over your lifetime. And it doesn't mean four years of college or two years of grad school. It could mean all kinds of other training programs that are now being developed by businesses. And for someone to get trained in the whole area of data and analytics today, which is a very, very hot job area, what you learn today in data analytics is not going to suffice for the way data and analytics operates 10 years from now. So, you're going to continue to have to keep going through, a lot of it programs are literally I suspect online programs, or audio programs. It doesn't have to be traditional education the way we grew up living with it.

Frank Luntz, FIL Incorporated president:

And Art, the numbers for the polling exactly depend that, prove that. 43% choose data analytics as being most important for being employed in a well-paying job in the future, 43%. Only 30% choose a traditional education from a college university. And 27% choose a trade skills, such as electrician, construction, manufacturing. So, the numbers back that up. And I think that the awareness of that is pretty strong. The only question is, how do they get that training?

Art Bilger, WorkingNation founder and CEO:

Well, we had WorkingNation have one, been focused on that. We've done a number, we did a major town hall event on data and analytics jobs in Philadelphia with the Wharton School. It was probably about a year and a half ago, but it wasn't just the Wharton School that was represented there. We had the president of the community college system. We had a woman out of the Philadelphia high school system there talking about what they're doing. And so, the good news is, yes, as you say, the awareness is becoming pretty significant, and there are programs that are developing at quite a rapid rate at this

point. This is an area I've been deeply involved in dating back to '07, '08, and I was one that started working with the Wharton School on a whole data analytics program. But today it's, you don't have to graduate from the Wharton School to get a job in data and analytics in this country. It's a big, big opportunity.

Frank Luntz, FIL Incorporated president:

It better come from the education system, because to answer an earlier question, only 30%, 34% of people have been offered by their employer, at any point, the opportunity to re-skill or up-skill, one-third. So, it's not happening from their employer. We have to figure out some way to instill this while they're in school.

Art Bilger, WorkingNation founder and CEO:

I do think we will be coming out of this with a lot broader and deeper thought process about the skilling and training of people. I've been working on this WorkingNation stuff, going back, I started thinking about it about seven years ago. But that was when, as a Dean at NYU said to me recently, she said, "Art, when you spoke here at NYU in February, your opening line was that over the next 10, 15 years, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." She said, "Art, courtesy of the pandemic, I suggest you seriously chop about 10 years off that timeline." And I do think the people who can really move things in society are becoming far, far more aware, courtesy of this pandemic.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So, Frank, you found that 56% of the workers said they weren't even aware that there were skills training programs out there, or how to find them. So, ask this question a lot. Here at WorkingNation, we tell stories all the time, and we're talking about this all the time, but how do we get everybody else to talk about this and help this to become a part of the national conversation?

Frank Luntz, FIL Incorporated president:

That's probably the most important question of this entire discussion, and it requires leadership at the lowest levels, at the highest levels. It requires leadership from our politicians, our academic leaders, and our business leaders. It requires the same kind of effort that we've put into issues like COVID. It requires it to put it into our workforce, because if we don't do this, other countries are doing it. China's engaged in this. We got training going on in Europe. It feels to me like we're being left behind, and we cannot afford, not now, not with the economy that we have. We can't afford to leave workers behind. And I know that sounds political. I know that sounds like a politician said it, but it's actually appropriate.

Frank Luntz, FIL Incorporated president:

If we don't have this, and by the way, to be clear, a national dialogue is not enough. There have to be set policies. And it's one of the reasons why I'm hoping that in the first six months of this year, because so many jobs are lost, because people are struggling, my hope is that it won't just be about how much money we're going to put in people's pockets. I want to know how many skills and talents we're going to bring out of people's brains. I think that is equally important.

Art Bilger, WorkingNation founder and CEO:

I have been very surprised, as I had said to the WorkingNation team, probably around April. I said, by June, the subject area that we're discussing here now, will be one of the biggest areas discussed on a daily and weekly basis in this country. I obviously was very wrong. Yes, the noise of the election, the

virus, Black Lives Matters, other stuff going on, has clearly kept this aside. I am very hopeful that when the election noise dies down, now, I have no idea when that will happen, but when the election noise dies down, this subject really needs to be the subject that fills that gap quite dramatically. I do think hearing bits and pieces coming out of certain appointees that are now beginning to speak, I do think there's a very good chance that this will be elevated. And I will tell you, at WorkingNation, since we are one of the few parties that are talking about these things, we are finding all kinds of organizations now coming to us, wanting to engage with us, I'll use the term partner with us loosely, and that's very encouraging.

Art Bilger, WorkingNation founder and CEO:

Many people are realizing this out there and just waiting for the opportunity that we could break out on a much bigger way. But I should also mention, we at WorkingNation already have very significant following, millions of followers. I do believe the power of media is going to be very important here, in terms of educating with the most sophisticated members of society, down to the most basic family and young adult in this country, as we look out over the next couple of years.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Frank, how can you feel about that? You talk to a lot of people in Washington. Are you getting a sense that this is going to be elevated?

Frank Luntz, FIL Incorporated president:

I've taken the polling data to governors. I've taken it to mayors, and taken it to elected officials on every level of government, and they express genuine interest and there's usually a follow-up. So, I know that it's on the radar, and I know that they do care about it, whether they follow through on it, it's going to be up to organizations like WorkingNation. It's going to be up to podcasts like this, that draw people's attention to it. And they turn around and demand action.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And of course WorkingNation will be continuing to tell these stories this month and for the rest of the year. And I really want to thank both of you, Frank, Art, for being my guests today.

Frank Luntz, FIL Incorporated president:

It's a pleasure.

Art Bilger, WorkingNation founder and CEO:

Thank you, Ramona. Thanks for having us.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I'm Ramona Schindelheim, Editor-In-Chief of WorkingNation. This is Work In Progress. Thank you for listening.