

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You're listening to Work in Progress. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, Editor-in-Chief of Working Nation. Work in Progress explores the rapidly changing workplace through conversations with innovators, educators, and decision-makers, people with solutions to today's workforce challenges.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Joining today on the podcast is Kelcey Reed, Chief Technology Officer at Opportunity@Work.

Kelcey Reed, Opportunity@Work CTO:

Thank you Ramona, for having me, and I'm honored to be here working with Working Nation.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

We have talked about Opportunity@Work at Working Nation a couple of times now. Our audience is somewhat familiar with it, but those who are tuning in who may not know what Opportunity@Work does, can you give me a little bit of a headline on what they do?

Kelcey Reed, Opportunity@Work CTO:

Opportunity@Work is a nonprofit organization that works with workers who are skilled through alternative routes, which we call STARS, to help them access career pathway opportunities. We build products, tools, and solutions that enable companies to hire STARS based on in demand skills, not pedigree.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So part of that idea behind the skills not pedigree is you don't have to go to college. You don't have to have a four-year degree to get a good job in this country. You just have to have the skills, correct?

Kelcey Reed, Opportunity@Work CTO:

That is correct. That is our primary focus, is looking at skills. You shouldn't have to have a college degree to acquire a good paying job. You should have the acumen to gain skills and utilize those skills to your fullest potential.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

That could be skills like on the job training, and they can be both hard and soft skills.

Kelcey Reed, Opportunity@Work CTO:

That is correct, definitely hard and soft skills. Like me as a technical person, project management, programming, those are hard skills, but then you need to look at leadership, communication, negotiation skills, right, team working, team building. Those are softer skills that is also equitable.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

If I'm a STAR, someone who does not have a four year degree, how do I let an employee or know what skills I have?

Kelcey Reed, Opportunity@Work CTO:

Basically, our platform allow STARS to input through their resume, input the various skills that they've acquired through training programs. They put them in. The training program provider then helps verify those skills. That will be bundled up and sent to the employers. So the employers now get a good view of skills that you attain while you was into an apprenticeship or a type of training program at which the training provider could also say, yes, we can actually match up or confirm that these other skills that were acquired or attained.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Now, is this new online marketplace, Stellarworx, is that where the job seeker goes to try to get matched with an employer who might want to hire them?

Kelcey Reed, Opportunity@Work CTO:

That's correct. So our talent marketplace platform, Stellarworx, actually levels the playing field for STARS who otherwise are overlooked in recruiting channels that cater to college graduates and are dominated by employers who rely specifically on pedigree as a proxy for skill by allowing them to showcase the skills they have for a job. So Stellarworx helps level the playing field.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

The employees who have signed on to this, are they big companies and small companies, or have you been targeting some of the bigger ones?

Kelcey Reed, Opportunity@Work CTO:

Typically some of the bigger companies. Right now, we have nearly 50 employers today.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

That's impressive. That gives people a lot of opportunity. So I would say you ... maybe you started out as a STAR yourself. You acquired your skills through alternative routes. You did not go to college first out of high school. Tell me a little bit about your own journey to acquire the skills that have made you successful your career.

Kelcey Reed, Opportunity@Work CTO:

Typical kid. I worked while I was in high school. I was sort of a geek. I love the analytical side of programming. I loved the black screen and trying to get the black screen to do tech things when I was a kid. Unfortunately, my mom and my father divorced, and I didn't have all of the resources to go into college. So I decided to go into the military where I could actually get money to go to college later, so I basically was postponing college. When I went in the military, my job was fire direction control, was a FDC, fire direction control for artillery. It is a computer operations, computer programming type of role in which I learned a lot of skills in how to program computers, how to operationalize various instances of being computer, how to plot on a map, how to read a map.

Kelcey Reed, Opportunity@Work CTO:

It was a lot of different things that I had to learn various skills, which gave me the opportunity to one, see how it really was to work outside of being a kid, as well as work for a large organization such as the military. I actually learned a lot soft skills as well as some of the hard skills.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

That's really a great example of on the job training, and you took something that you're already loved and you were able to parlay it into the next step in a career.

Kelcey Reed, Opportunity@Work CTO:

Yes.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So how long were you in the military?

Kelcey Reed, Opportunity@Work CTO:

I was in the military for eight years. My plan originally was to do four years and I ended up doing eight years. I was one that had to go to the First Gulf War. So because of that, going to the Gulf War and coming back home, I extended myself for another four years because I was still wasn't really prepared to go into college. I was thinking too, the longer I stay in the military, if I stay, whatever I do in the military, it gives me a leg up to go into corporate America when I got out. I just thought that I wouldn't have to face a lot of the challenges that most people that graduate from high school will face, right?

Kelcey Reed, Opportunity@Work CTO:

Going into the real world, as they say, corporate America or the real world, I would have more skills that will easily land me a high paying job. I was hit with a brick wall when I got out of the military that, that wasn't so true. There were ... A lot of employers look for you to have a four year degree before they let you come in and make higher paying jobs like a management type of job. Although I was managing troops, I was also dealing with a lot of stress and all of the other things that come from being part of a war. The employers was not looking at my military experience or the skills that I gained in the military. Hence why, another reason why I was like, "Oh, I have to go to college. I have to go to college, and so I can get a good job."

Kelcey Reed, Opportunity@Work CTO:

Hence why I love what we are doing here at Opportunity@Wor. The Stellar platform is people shouldn't be faced with the same challenges that I was faced with, especially if you've gained real hard skills that can translate for you to be very productive inside of an organization. That's what we need today.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I've also looked at your resume and I've seen all the different languages that you can program and all the systems that you understand. I'm sure you've acquired those over the years, but coming out of the military without a degree but with all this knowledge, is it that they just can't see it? Is it just easier to say, "If you have a degree, I know that you must be good at something?" I always try to figure that out.

Kelcey Reed, Opportunity@Work CTO:

That's a good one, because early on in my career, I was faced with some of the same issues that we've seen in years ago. As I became a leader, I started to have the same bias of, I need to have a person with a four year degree because if I know that they went to school with a four year degree, that they can study and they could learn. They could do these things that, again, the prejudice and bias that's placed

on our eyes when being in a corporate ... behind corporate walls is that we need this because that person is smarter or that person is this or that person is that. Again, that's a bias.

Kelcey Reed, Opportunity@Work CTO:

I remember when I was working at TransUnion and I was faced with bringing in talent at a very rapid pace, and this is 2000, early 2000s. We still was faced with the same problem of, we needed more talent. We needed more people. We need, especially in IT, engineering. You don't see a lot of folks in ... with that science and technology discipline. They run from it. So it was either go abroad or find alternatives. Same thing when I was at Merchant E-Solutions, find alternatives. We have to find alternatives and my blinders start to come away, start to go down. I realized that I just need someone that is skilled and understands how ... With technology, technology changes every three to six months. That person has to have that same knack to want to re-educate or relearn something on a regular basis in order to be very competent in their job. Again, I had to change. I had to change my way of thinking.

Kelcey Reed, Opportunity@Work CTO:

I had to reprogram myself to say colleges isn't everything. College is important, yes. I don't want to ever tell anyone college isn't important, but college isn't for everyone. We have to remember that we see the numbers. 70 plus million folks out here do not finish a four year degree. They go into the military service, just like I did. They go into community colleges and do two years. You got that working mom that is trying to put food on her kid's table, and she's a single mother that can't. Should I penalize them to say, because you don't have a college diploma, you shouldn't come work. No, we shouldn't do that. We should really find ways to reward them for one, trying to get the skills that they need in order to be competent in their job and proficient in their job, right? That is key.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You mentioned it earlier that a lot of folks who are STARS, skilled through alternative routes, come from low income communities, and regardless of color, they maybe can't afford to go to college. They can't afford to even take a one-year training program, community college. They also may have, depending on their age, responsibilities like caregiving, whether it's for a child, for an older person. Connecting those people, and I think the number you guys come up with is 70 million, connecting them through the Stellarworx sounds like the first step in the right direction, but what would you like to see next? What is your vision on how to grow this connection between job seekers and employers?

Kelcey Reed, Opportunity@Work CTO:

I feel strongly from Opportunity@Work's standpoint as well that we believe employers can focus purely on job skills rather than continuing to privilege college degrees. That they can dramatically increase diversity in the workforce and expand economic opportunity. I think that is definitely something that should happen. There is a groundswell right now of business leaders that is starting to see the value of STARS. We want to capitalize on that movement as well by expanding and scaling out our work. That comes with onboarding new employers, onboarding training providers onto Stellarworx and working with new researchers to analyze the STARS population, engaging funders, supporting the STARS movement, and creating a national conversation. I think that is what we really need to see happen, is everybody catching blaze of this new movement.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

We've talked a little bit about the skills that you have. As the chief technology officer, how do you hope to use those to help shape that new future?

Kelcey Reed, Opportunity@Work CTO:

I think technology is the way in which you grab anybody. I mean, if you don't modernize, if you don't allow the modern ways of technology to drive that, then we're missing the opportunity. I'm here as the chief technology officer to show to the technical voice of allowing for STARS to be, this whole movement of the STARS movement to be the focal point of every employer, every training provider. Allowing the analytics side of it, the modernization of APIs and allowing people to connect in various ways to be able to connect to our platform and allow them for STARS and employees, everyone is actually connecting onto our platform. So again, having the agility in technology is one of the biggest things that we need here.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Kelcey, I want to wish you good luck in your new job.

Kelcey Reed, Opportunity@Work CTO:

Thank you. Thank you, Ramona.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

It was a pleasure talking to you. I've been speaking with Kelcey Reed, the Chief Technology Officer at Opportunity@Work. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, Editor-in-Chief at Working Nation. Thank you very much for listening.