

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 wrap up 2023, it's time to take a look at some of the key workforce issues ahead in 2024. Joining me in the discussion today are WorkingNation Founder and CEO, Art Bilger, and WorkingNation President Jane Oates, who is transitioning into the role of senior advisor in the new year. Welcome back, both of you.

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

Thanks Ramona.

Art Bilger, WorkingNation president & CEO:

Ramona, thank you as always. Thanks for the incredible insights that you bring to the table. Looking forward to this discussion.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Jane, we've talked so many times about what the issues are today and we always look ahead. What are you looking at in the coming year?

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

It's hard not to look at the federal government first in the new year. Certainly, the House just put out a new version of a reauthorization of WIOA. They put out short-term Pell and all the money that was put out by the Department of Commerce for CHIPS, for Build Back Better, all that is starting to hit the streets. All eyes are going to be, I think at least for the beginning of the year on the federal government to see what's going to happen with those structural laws that really mean a lot to the people in the workforce space. I think we're also going to look at states, because I think at the end of 2023, some states were doing amazing things. Changing the length of time to degrees, dealing with skills-based hiring. Some states dealing with competency-based education. I think it's really an exciting time to watch government next year.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I love what you brought up about the CHIPS Act and the Infrastructure and Jobs Act because that creates a lot of opportunity and a lot of skills that people have, but they may transition with those as they move forward. We've talked to our advisory board because we always love to do this at the end of the year, we always love to talk to the advisory board and say, what issues are you looking at? Something that has been on our table for the last year but is really heating up again is artificial intelligence. How do you think that's changing the workforce?

Art Bilger, WorkingNation president & CEO:

Much is going on, but the good news is I think within companies and other types of organizations, government, the not-for-profit world, people are really digging in to gain an understanding of where AI can take them and are beginning to implement strategies for training and skilling personnel so that they can participate in this very significantly changing work environment.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Jane, I would say, and you'd probably agree with me, that anybody who doesn't embrace this new technology that's moving quickly, it affects everybody. It affects people in a retail store. Some of that's going to be used for inventory. I think it seems this is an important issue that we all look at as we move forward and try to figure out as workers, what do we need to know?

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

I think that's right. I think most employers right now are struggling with whether AI is going to impact every job, the use of AI tools. Obviously, we're not going to have to learn to build the algorithms for AI, but we're going to have to adapt to how our jobs change. Very simply in the world of writing, a lot of people will use AI for a first draft, so they have to improve their editing skills. They have to be better readers of things to get things better. A few months ago, I used it in a conference. AI as it exists today, especially large language AI is filled with errors. I think you talked about Ramona, some of the interviews you did with our advisory group, and I think Bill Raduchel said it right. We have no idea, jobs are going to change. All jobs are going to change, and we right now have no idea how.

Our educational institutions, I think it was really optimistic of Art saying people were starting to experiment with it, but our educational institutions don't know what to teach people. Some schools are banning the use of it. They're spending all their money in buying software that can detect plagiarism. Other schools are embracing it and saying, let's use this as a tool. Much like they did with the smartphone. Some schools banned the use of it and other schools said, bring it in and let's see how we can use it to accelerate and expand your education. I think we're still in the dark ages with this. I am not as optimistic as Art is that everybody's getting into it and training with it and using it. I think half the world is ready to figure out how to use it, and half the world is scared to death.

Art Bilger, WorkingNation president & CEO:

I actually very much agree with Jane there, and she just raised something. That is the thing that I probably think most about from an AI standpoint, and that is your reference to education. I do spend real time and do have significant concerns about how AI gets implemented in the education systems that we have, whether it's at the college level, and I've talked with university professors about that. I'll be honest with you, I've gotten some optimistic views from some university professors and how they're beginning to utilize it and work with, although one professor who was quite optimistic, but he did say at one point he had his students write a paper. He had everyone write the paper in class.

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

I think now you're spot on. I think the big worry in my mind is will it exacerbate the divide that already exists between well-resourced schools, K12 and colleges, well-resourced people and people with fewer resources and schools with your resources.

Art Bilger, WorkingNation president & CEO:

You're absolutely right. That divide, we have very serious risks with regard to the expansion of that divide. I mentioned talking about university and I've been talking to professors at universities. I haven't had conversations, but I'm thinking a lot about, and I have three young grandchildren, although only one at age three started preschool. The other two are still too young. I think about at those very early ages, how are we going to get the educators of young people knowledgeable about AI and ultimately, the utilization of that to the point you just made, Jane, that divide is probably going to grow dramatically. We got to figure it out, how to get educators educated with regard to AI and how they can utilize it in their efforts.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I think both Chike Aguh and Hector Mujica on the advisory board, they both brought up something that made me think of, also is the equity. As fast as all of these skills are changing, how do we make sure everybody has those resources, have that access so that they are equipped to participate in an equitable way in our economy? That education part is very key. You need to make that skilling available to everyone.

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

Well, and how do you just get the information out? Kids, you have captive audiences in K12, but after age 18, everybody disperses. You think about the ease of maybe getting to younger people, but how do you get to incumbent workers? Gary and Gina Cease and certainly Mark and Paul, members of our advisory group brought up older workers. While I am deeply concerned always about older workers, the reality is what about those people 30 to 60? Who's going after them and who's saying to them, you're going to need to go back? It really does land right on the lap of employers. Employers have a huge responsibility here.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I love what Brandon Busted said, which was, "The future won't distinguish between places of learning and places of work because there'll be one and the same."

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

I think Brandon is such an optimist, but the reality is there are a lot of employers, small, medium and large who are terrific in this space. There are an equal number of other employers who think I give you a paycheck, I don't need to give you anything else. Those employers are going to have employees who are lost in the shelf.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

We're going to CES in early January and this podcast will air before then and we're going to be there talking to a lot of tech companies about how much technology, not just AI, but other software is changing the way we work. Art, do you see this as opportunity or do you see it as a problem for the workforce because they're going to have to learn new skills?

Art Bilger, WorkingNation president & CEO:

I see it as a long-term opportunity, but I also see that we will have clearly meaningful bumps along the way. We've had technological changes throughout the centuries. You end up with some bumps when technology changes the employment world. You have some bumps along the way, but I would say when you look back, a lot of very positive things have come out of it, but you just have some indigestion along the way. Here, I do think we're going to have meaningful indigestion along the way. The outcome offers tremendous opportunity across society. I'm just making this up, but what happens because of AI that all of a sudden, five-day-a-week work goes to three-day-a-week work, more time with family, more time with friends. I do think there is going to be very positive outcome that flows out of it, but significant bumps along the way.

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

I think there are sectors where we're going to see the benefit. We're already seeing the benefit. In healthcare, I think this is going to make personalized healthcare a reality. You're going to be able to use some of the things that are done with DNA testing, get it done faster. You're going to be able to make sure that people who have long-term illnesses are tracked better. I think the same thing in education. I think that there's a real opportunity to do individualized education for the first time ever in a time effective way if as Art said, we get teachers the training they need. I think there are big issues that we have to solve early in this. Bias is a big issue here. AI makes assumptions about people, about the way they look, about the way they talk. We need to make sure that we address bias.

We need to address plagiarism. Right now, we're seeing elite university presidents being questioned about their use of language and phraseology in their work. Think of what happens when AI is more universally used. You'll have phrases that are reused and reused and who has ownership of them? I think plagiarism is something that's really important. I think the other thing that is critical to me in this is personal protections. We need to protect personal information here, whether it's patented information or just secure personal information. Right now, AI has no built-ins on that. AI will pick up your social security number, your age, everything about you if it's public record and make it more public.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

My worry, this comes out of just my journalism background too, is I want to make sure that AI doesn't spread disinformation. You need good, accurate information to be a participant in our democracy and in our workforce. I want to make sure that there are those guardrails in place that also protect us from that bad information.

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

Look, when I mentioned before that I use this at a presentation, I had a generative AI, I won't use the name, write my bio. My real bio was in the program and I asked all the participants to look in their program and then they must've thought I was an egomaniac. Then I put the generative AI bio up and the generative AI had me listed as the Assistant Secretary of Education. I was never the assistant secretary of education. You think about that kind of information. If news outlets get lazy and do that, it gets to your misinformation and think of the other things that could be twisted. Really, I think you're right, Ramona. I think it's a real danger.

Art Bilger, WorkingNation president & CEO:

I've been focused for many, many years on data and analytics dating back many years. I have always been focused on the collection of data, just personally. Who needs to know about me individually and what I spend, how much did I spend for a cup of coffee today or whatever? That's been a concern of mine for a long time. Obviously, I've totally lost control of that because everyone is collecting data out there. I think Jane's point about misinformation is incredibly important. I actually believe that is a fundamental issue that we're faced with today in society. I really believe there's so much misinformation that is in some cases, many cases unintentionally used, but also, in a lot of cases not unintentionally with real intention. I believe a lot of the conflicting thoughts and a lot of the division in society and things like that, there's a lot of just misinformation.

I'd like to be optimistic that through real advancements of AI, we can have the potential of correcting flows of information and understanding. That might be a positive from a societal standpoint. It's going to take a while. I know, and as I said a few minutes ago, I know there are going to be a lot of bumps along the way. I do feel some constructive senses with regard to where society can go, and I am a believer

we've got real challenges right now. I'm hopeful that this can actually facilitate people coming together in more efficient ways.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

As we wrap up this conversation, I would love for you both to share your thoughts on what should workers know as we're moving ahead into the new year? How can they protect themselves, prepare themselves, what can they do so they can be in line for these quality jobs that AI or other technology are going to make available?

Art Bilger, WorkingNation president & CEO:

A key ingredient going forward from a constructive standpoint is the concept of lifelong learning. Workers, whoever you might be, have to be thinking about that from themselves as well as their family members that looking out to understand and learn from others where one might guide themselves. We're all not just sitting there with all the knowledge possible, and I will say in today's digital world where there's so much availability of information out there, people ought to be really utilizing those sources of digital information out there that could educate. It could be a little podcast being done by Ramona at the WorkingNation, or it can be a certificate program with regard to the retraining of skills for the next round of employment society. Key is going to be learning new skills. No matter who you are, you're going to be learning new skills on a continuing basis to be successful. You have to just mentally approach life as wanting to learn more.

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

When you talk about workers across the spectrum, they have to feel good about what they're doing. That's to me, a piece of purpose. Embedded in that is we have to give every job and every worker the dignity that they deserve. We need to respect and appreciate workers at all levels. The three of us are so fortunate, but we need to remember that there are people out there when we say, and by the way, I agree with you, Art, people should be continuously learning. There are people that are really struggling just to balance their kids, their home life, their work, getting to work. We get out and get into a car.

There are so many people that have to take public transportation or hope that the ride they have is going to show up. I think we need to remember that when we say workers particularly, who need to up-skill, need to be given the time during the day by their employer to do some of that. Because time is their biggest enemy. They can figure out money in one way or another, but they may not have internet at home. They may not have a computer at home. Still, too many of the tools that we use all the time are computer-friendly but aren't smartphone-friendly. We haven't gotten to the point that you can do everything on your phone that you need to do. The entities that so many people rely on, like public libraries, like businesses who have free internet aren't open 24/7.

I thought it was so beautiful, Ramona, when you were interviewing the advisory group, because I think to a one, at least 10 of them brought up populations who are marginalized. I think every time we make a recommendation, whether it be we WorkingNation or we anyone that people should do this, we need to make sure that people have what they need in order to do that. Both the navigation, the career navigation, that so many aren't getting, the technology tools that aren't so well identified, and also, the kind of lift that they need. People call them wraparound services, but who's giving them the support that they need?

The three of us may be independent learners, and many people listening to your podcast are independent learners because they're listening to a podcast. What about the people who aren't, the people who the need the structure of a cohort, the people who need the structure of someone telling

them, you have to do this before you can do this? Finally, I would say to you, somebody has got to help people articulate their skills. Too many of us, particularly when we look to change jobs, are not able to clearly and accurately articulate what skills we have. Vocational skills sometimes are easy because Art mentions certifications. You can have a certification, but how about durable skills? How do you talk about your durable skills?

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

As we wrap this up, I'm going to say my own two cents on that is I want to make sure there is that knowledge out there where you can find. That career navigation to me is very important because people don't have social capital. All over the country, not everybody has that access to it. I do want to thank you both. As always, I really appreciate you. We've done this a couple of times together and I look forward to doing it again. Thank you very much.

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

Thanks, Ramona. Thanks, Art.

Art Bilger, WorkingNation president & CEO:

Ramona, thank you very much. Jane, thank you.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I've been speaking with Art Bilger, Founder and CEO of WorkingNation, Jane Oates, President of WorkingNation. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, Editor-in-Chief of WorkingNation. Thank you for listening.