

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You are 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.

If you haven't heard of the SkillUp Coalition yet, let me tell you a little something about it. SkillUp is a nonprofit that, through its online platform, helps people without college degrees find training and job pathways to in-demand careers that provide livable wages and other benefits. Since its launch in July 2020, it's supported more than two million people in that career journey. Joining me to discuss the organization, and what the platform offers, and what's next is Steve Lee, SkillUp Coalition's CEO. Steve, thanks for joining the podcast.

Steven Lee, SkillUp Coalition CEO:

Thanks for having me, it's an honor to be here.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I love talking to you, Steve, because the focus is always on those people who don't have the college degree, we call STARS.

Steven Lee, SkillUp Coalition CEO:

Yes.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Because you and your group, and our group are both in the Tear the Paper Ceiling campaign. So tell me about the mission, tell me who you're helping.

Steven Lee, SkillUp Coalition CEO:

We're helping STARS, those without college degrees, specifically those who are earning under \$40,000. And our mission is really to give them a leg up in their journey towards a skilled, high-quality job.

We do it several ways. First, we market to those people to begin with, so the people that come are those people, because often, those folks are left out of the equation. We want them to be part of the equation, and then when they come to the SkillUp experience, which as you noted is a technology platform, what we've tried to do is make it easy and simple for them to get the highest-quality information for them to make the right choice.

Whether that's the right career that someone should choose, whether that's the right training program from which they might get a credential to get that skill, we'll talk about skills quite a bit, or if you have the skills to be able to get the job, and we've curated that such that we think that the options we have are real and viable, and they're real for the population we care about. And we'll talk about how our sort of new GenAI tool will help that. That's, simply stated, what we do.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Let's start with the career pathway: I think the training part of it is very important. How do you choose? How do you identify and point people to the right training programs or what you think are the right training programs?

Steven Lee, SkillUp Coalition CEO:

What we've done is we've taken all the programs out there, and there are hundreds of thousands, and what we've done, we've put them into a filter, a sort of proprietary filter, where we've tried to weed out all the noise around programs that don't meet the needs of STARs.

We try to select programs that are a combination of low cost, because sometimes folks don't have the financial resources, short term, because sometimes folks don't have the time, and as best as we can, some proxy of quality. And quality, plus short term, plus low cost is how we define quality, because those are the needs of STARs. And again, from the hundreds of thousands of programs [inaudible 00:03:13], we've selected down to a few thousands that we think are best in class.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And that criteria is less than \$10,000 a year.

Steven Lee, SkillUp Coalition CEO:

Correct.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Takes less than 12 months to complete.

Steven Lee, SkillUp Coalition CEO:

Correct.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And industry-recognized credentials, which I think is a very important part of this, making sure that it's not just some random piece of learning that's not going to help you.

Steven Lee, SkillUp Coalition CEO:

That's a great point. It's great that you mentioned that, I forgot to mention it. 100% right, Ramona, to your point that we want folks to be able to get a job, that's our ultimate goal, right? They're not going to get a job if it's not recognized by whatever industry they choose to be in. So that's 100% correct, and thank you for reminding me about that.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And one of the things also I noted, you point to apprenticeships. These are earn and learn opportunities. Talk about the value of that.

Steven Lee, SkillUp Coalition CEO:

There's mutual benefit on this. For an employer, they're often looking for a STAR talent to be able to fill the gaps, and for them to be able to train into the opportunities that they have with the company. And from a worker perspective, they're looking for opportunities where they can show their skillset through working with a company and through that skillset and the experience they get, they can ultimately get into a full-time job or to a better job within a company.

I think the value of it for us is really around mutual benefit between the employer and the worker.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Does that fall under ... Do you list those under the training part of your platform or do you list that under your job board?

Steven Lee, SkillUp Coalition CEO:

You would find it on the jobs board. The cool thing about our jobs board is that it's a little bit like Airbnb. You can sort and filter for the things that matter for you most, based on whatever filter that you think is important for you to provide the best opportunity [inaudible 00:05:00].

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And when you decide on those jobs, do you curate them? Do you look at what are the high-demand industries? How do you pick those that you allow on your board?

Steven Lee, SkillUp Coalition CEO:

Yeah, it's a great question. So they all anchor on in-demand industries. So yeah, you could [inaudible 00:05:17] they're tech-related, they're healthcare related, et cetera, so they're all in demand. And then, what we do is we do a combination of art and science. So the science is we pull off API, so we pull off Lightcast data. Lightcast data has, as you know, lots of jobs, but for STARS, many of those jobs are not available, so we do our own filter. Just like we do on the training catalog, we filter jobs. The jobs have to pay living wage in their local community, based on the MIT Living Wage Calculator. They have to be with companies that we've identified as being pretty good on up-skilling their workers, so think about the [inaudible 00:05:55], we use that as a proxy for [inaudible 00:05:57] companies.

They have to be a job that doesn't require a college degree, for real. I don't want to pick on Google, because they're our friends and they're your friends, but let's be honest, Google software engineering jobs, if they say, "That doesn't require a college degree," that's probably not right. Then you need a college degree to work at Google as an engineer. And so we're not going to put those up. Even though the API may say, "No college degree," we filter that out, because again, our workers come first, and again, we want to make sure the jobs we have are real, and viable, and in demand, things of that sort.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And you're about to launch, in July, CareerNav GPT. How does that integrate into the platform that you have already?

Steven Lee, SkillUp Coalition CEO:

At the outset, it's going to be a separate site, because we want to make sure that it works, and we're creating value, and we want to make sure that if there are any sort of hiccups at the outset that it doesn't affect the scope experience. But ultimately, we're going to put into the actual scope experience. There are lots of reasons we're excited about this, so I'll just name a name a few. One is I mentioned that we are largely Airbnb, like, "Let's choose your journey," which is great, but sometimes workers need to be able to get more than choose your own journey, is how can we be more Netflix? How can we recommend stuff that might be viable for you based on the information you put in? So we're excited about the opportunity about offering something different and more.

Second, we have some amazing technology partners on this, a group called Brighthive. Where we come in as SkillUp is we have lots of users, which is great, and we have good content. I mentioned how we

curate, and so we make a recommendation and we think it'll be a recommendation towards a high-quality job, a high-quality program, because we've curated that experience.

The last thing I'll say about this, but I think it's really important, is we're going to work with an evaluation firm to measure impact. Is someone better off because they went through the CareerNav GPT than if they didn't go through CareerNav GPT? And I think that's missing in the field, is impact around AI. And so we're going to focus a lot of our efforts on evaluation.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And your other partner on that is Burning Glass Institute?

Steven Lee, SkillUp Coalition CEO:

Yes, Burning Glass is a piece of that, around both some of the evaluation stuff, but also we think, just given there are norms in the field, some kind of white paper, at the end of this sharing learnings, and also learning about what's happening in the broader workforce, AI ecosystem as a whole. And this will happen a couple of years down the road, when the system actually has some learnings about how AI is working.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Are all of these options for people, are they provided at a cost or free?

Steven Lee, SkillUp Coalition CEO:

Everything is free, 100% free. We have the grace of philanthropy to help our efforts. So for the worker, it is and will always be free of cost.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Let's shift a little bit, and I want to talk about the importance of skills-first hiring. We hear that phrase a lot. We have advocated for a long, as journalists telling stories about that. You have advocated, we mentioned Tear the Paper Ceiling earlier. What is the advantage for a corporation to do that in this time when we need a lot of workers?

Steven Lee, SkillUp Coalition CEO:

Well, one, companies need workers. And second, if we're being honest, companies, they need to get workers. And so the idea of skills by hiring is [inaudible 00:09:19] that there are lots of folks out there who companies typically don't look at, that is STARS, that have the skill sets or could soon get the skill sets to be able to fill the ranks of companies who need those folks. And rather than relying on typical sources, which I get, I understand why that happens. There's a whole pool of millions of folks out there who could fill those ranks either immediately or quickly.

It would be good for companies and workers obviously, but it's also good for community, it's good for the larger ecosystem, it's good for community development. Usually people stay where they are and it's good for tax [inaudible 00:09:58]. There's lots of reasons why it's good. To me, it's where the movement should go and I recognize why it's a little slow, but it's definitely where I think the movement should be going.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I'm glad you mentioned that because I do feel like there's a lot of talk about it and it does feel kind of slow.

Steven Lee, SkillUp Coalition CEO:

Yes.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

It feels like it hasn't trickled down in a way. People talk about it up here-

Steven Lee, SkillUp Coalition CEO:

Yeah.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

... on the upper levels. How do we shift that? How do we get the hiring managers? I don't have an answer for it. I turn to you. I always say this, what's the answer?

Steven Lee, SkillUp Coalition CEO:

I think it's an [inaudible 00:10:32] question, which honestly many of our friends probably have a much better answer than I do. But yeah, I always try to look at, Ramona, if I were the employer, put yourself in the shoes of the employer. If you and I were an HR person, what would we do? And honestly, I don't know if I would be any different because we don't have enough data yet perhaps to be able to make the right decisions yet. We just hear from advocates, which is great, but advocates don't pay the bills. I can't get a promotion because advocates are telling me that I should do this. So I think there's a little data in that misinformation.

The other thing I'll say, and this going to sound a little controversial, is I look at it from a worker perspective, and we learned this because at SkillUp, we have so much data, we know where workers are and where they want to be, and sometimes the ambition of the worker is higher than their skillset to get the, I'm just being honest, to get the job.

And so employers should not hire that person because they're not ready yet. But if they are ready, they should hire. Or secondarily, is that there's a middleman. Training programs, industry recognized credentials where that person who doesn't have the skills could get the skills quickly, short term, and then be able to work. So how does the employee fit into the ecosystem?

If we can think about that in a collaborative, put yourself in their shoes mentality, which I don't think always happens, I think that will go a little bit a ways, closing some of the gap.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Yeah, we've talked about how a diploma, a college diploma, has been a proxy for your-

Steven Lee, SkillUp Coalition CEO:

Yeah, correct.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

... knowledge and your ability. So if there are more, perhaps to your point, more of the credentials that signal actual skills, maybe that would help get that skills first hiring moving forward.

Steven Lee, SkillUp Coalition CEO:

I think that's what Walmart and others are doing around learning records. It's that that's a validated credential that can be trusted by the employer and it's also interoperable. You can use it wherever. The challenge is that we're still early stages in these digital wallets and the employers have not quite recognized it yet, nor have the training programs to be honest with you. So there's work to be done. But I think that's the idea. You have those validated credentials as a digital wallet.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Yeah, I think it's hard to ask the right question-

Steven Lee, SkillUp Coalition CEO:

It is.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

... to have someone be able to demonstrate their skills. I can tell someone I can do something and maybe I've been doing it for a couple of decades, right? How do you demonstrate it in some ways as well? And that goes mostly to the older worker.

Steven Lee, SkillUp Coalition CEO:

100%. I'll use AI and I'll combine it with older worker for a second. Theoretically, what I think AI can do is that if you, as a worker, and this is what we're going to do with SkillUp, if you give us some information, maybe a resume, maybe a LinkedIn profile, and then you answer a few questions around soft skills and your experiences, those three factors, skills, soft skills, and experiences can lead to an answer. That answer could be to an older worker, "Hey, you have the right skill sets because you've had 30 years of experience doing X, Go for this job." Or, it can be, "You're not quite ready yet. You need this something." Again, I think AI can help in this journey to help winnow the options that are real viable for older workers and younger workers alike.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Do you get feedback from the people who use your platform, the workers and job seekers themselves on the shift, at least in the conversation, to skills first? Are they thrilled? Are they scared?

Steven Lee, SkillUp Coalition CEO:

The answer is yes in terms of getting data. We actually have a survey panel of SkillUp users that's over 5,000 users. It's a lot of users. So we ask a bunch of questions and you get a bunch of answers.

I'll share another partnership. We have a partnership with the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta where through their, what's called their Worker Voice series, they're trying to get the voice of the worker in tune with the informed monetary policy. They've used our survey to ask a few questions.

So from that, one thing we've learned is that workers are pretty optimistic these days. Most workers have a job. Unemployment rates, it's like 3.5. It's still pretty low, right? It's very different than two years ago. People are optimistic.

What makes optimism less optimistic? Things like inflation, cost rising up, cost of housing. Things that go outside of work are things that cause families stress. That's why we need the whole ecosystem

[inaudible 00:14:56] because it's not just about work, it's about other factors, et cetera, which you and I know very well.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Yeah, a job is more than a paycheck and it can mean a lot to someone in a sense of purpose, in a sense of meaning in their lives and providing for their families.

SkillUp Coalition, SkillUp platform, SkillUp.org, free career pathways, training programs, job opportunities, and something new coming in July.

Thank you, Steve, for sharing all that detail with us.

Steven Lee, SkillUp Coalition CEO:

Thanks, Ramona, for allowing me to share.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I've been speaking with Steve Lee, the CEO of SkillUp Coalition. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor in chief of Working Nation. Thank you for listening.