

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.

I'm here with Josh Elder, vice president and head of Grantmaking for Siegel Family Endowment. Josh oversees strategic grantmaking and partnerships focused on the areas in society that Siegel is very interested in, and we'll get to that. But Josh, thanks for being on the Work in Progress podcast.

Josh Elder, Siegel Family Endowment VP and head of grantmaking:

Ramona, thanks so much for having me. Looking forward to the conversation today.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Josh, share with me and the audience what Siegel's areas of interest are. What is your mission?

Josh Elder, Siegel Family Endowment VP and head of grantmaking:

Yeah, happy to talk a little bit about what we are up to here at Siegel Family Endowment. So Siegel Family Endowment is a private family foundation focused on understanding and shaping the impact of technology on society. And when you hear that, you may say, "What does that actually mean? That's so broad." But it's actually so fascinating to think about when our chairman, David Siegel, and our current president, Katy Knight, were really thinking about shaping the mission and vision for the foundation.

So many people were confused why philanthropy and a private foundation would want to focus on understanding and shaping the impact of tech on society about 10 years ago. And now when you think about it, everyone's like, "Oh my gosh, that's exactly what we should be doing, given everything that's going on around emerging technology, we can't go a conversation without hearing about AI."

And so how we view that because it is so broad, we have narrowed that down to have three critical areas that we focus on. One is learning. And we were very intentional to call it learning instead of education because we feel like learning happens everywhere. Oftentimes when we think about education, people pigeonhole that into what happens inside of a school and particular K-12, workforce, and then infrastructure, which happy to talk a little bit more about what our view of multidimensional infrastructure looks like in society.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

The impact of technology on society is something that I've actually had a lot of conversations with people about in particular with how ubiquitous AI is right now. What kind of work have you been doing in that area? What have you been seeing?

Josh Elder, Siegel Family Endowment VP and head of grantmaking:

Completely agree with you in terms of you cannot go almost a single conversation without someone talking about AI. And I think I've heard quite a few of our partners talk about just how sometimes it's almost sucking all the oxygen out of the room, and you have no choice but to engage. Everybody, no matter who you are, where you are, you cannot run away from it.

And so the way that we've been thinking about it in particular with our workforce is understanding how AI is impacting work today. So both in terms of the impact that it's having on employers, but really in particular, and this is where we want to elevate this conversation, the impact of AI on workers and how

do you really look at and examine the fact that is AI being done to workers or is AI being done with workers? And what's the impact of worker voice, especially in designing AI technologies? Because I think oftentimes when you hear AI and workforce, everyone immediately jumps to thinking about, "Okay, is AI going to replace people? Is AI going to displace people and reduce jobs?" And we know we've seen some of the early stats, and some of that is happening, but we also know there's other aspects in which AI is impacting the way workers are interacting with AI and emerging technology, thinking about how people are even hired, how they're monitored, surveilled, or just daily interactions of how they're using AI in their day-to-day workplace.

And so that's what we've been really interested in looking at, how do you understand the impact that workers are facing, but then as more and more people are jumping on this bandwagon and trying to create tools and products, are they actually leveraging the work of voice and designing those AI tools to really mitigate some of the harms and the bias that we unfortunately are seeing day-to-day with more and more emerging technology taking place and impacting workers, especially marginalized workers in the workforce.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

A lot of the conversation I've been having lately has been around the idea that it will take away some of the maybe more mundane parts of jobs. But that means then to be able to get a good job out of this, you will need to have different skills, maybe analytic skills to be able to take whatever data people are mining from some of the higher level knowledge jobs and be able to work with that. Because if you're going to, I'm going to say automate or make easier, more mundane tasks, then maybe those jobs will go away.

Josh Elder, Siegel Family Endowment VP and head of grantmaking:

I completely agree with you. And it makes me think about even when we talk about the connection to education and learning and workforce and different pathways, that's something we've been talking about as a foundation that has been focused on the importance of computer science education and computational thinking, being integrated from an early age as soon as possible. Not saying that all students need to go into a tech job, but we believe in order to be successful and competitive and a productive citizen in society, the basic elements of understanding how to think computationally, being able to solve really complex problems are going to set you up for success no matter the path that you choose.

And now that we are in this tech-driven world where everything that we interact with is integrated with technology, you're almost forced to be able to need that skill set in order to be successful no matter what you're choosing to do, no matter what type of job you are encountering. I think about it even just dealing and talking to my mom and just having to help her understand how to navigate this complex technological world that we're living in. And even her realizing that she has to kind of upscale herself in order to be able to just live and survive in this rapidly changing society that we're in.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

There is a percentage that I've been quoting recently. I saw it in a report that 90% of current jobs need some kind of digital skills. I think it's a little bit more than 90% now. So this idea that you have to upscale, and it is a very important one. And the idea that you may have some of these soft skills, this analytic mind is really good, but you're still going to need those digital skills. And making sure everybody has the opportunity for it seems to be a pressing societal issue right now.

Josh Elder, Siegel Family Endowment VP and head of grantmaking:

Absolutely. I think that exactly what you just pointed out, and thank you for highlighting that, having the opportunity and the access and equitable access to do that, because I think when we start talking about having the privilege to be able to upscale, not everyone has that privilege and that opportunity for a variety of reasons. And so having equitable access and the know-how to understand that I need to upscale I think is so important, right? Whether that's financial resources or just other resources that are needed, oftentimes the people who need it the most don't have access, yet alone equitable access. And I think that's something that we've been looking at when we were looking at some of our even just traditional kind of workforce elements of upscaling and rescaling, whether related to technology or not. How do you provide the resources needed for people to have the opportunities to upscale and even to know what they need to upscale in in order for them to have a successful livelihood?

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

The idea of making sure people are aware is an obsession of mine, to be able to share the idea that there are opportunities out there, and they're variable. Time poverty is a big issue if you have more than one job, if you're like a parent. So the idea that time poverty limits when you can get that upscaling. That's where this idea of internet infrastructure broadband can really be useful because maybe your children are asleep and then you can go online and learn some of the things that you need. That's an area I think you spend some time looking at, right? The internet and broadband.

Josh Elder, Siegel Family Endowment VP and head of grantmaking:

Yes. No, the importance of connectivity. And so where that falls for us is in our infrastructure work. And I think you are exactly right where you don't know what's out there if you don't have access to the know-how. And so as we've seen with the pandemic, whether we're looking at either if you were able to work from home and needed connectivity to be able to plug into your job, if you had children or you were a student during that time and had to move to remote learning, the impact and importance of connectivity and the role of digital infrastructure is so important. And unfortunately, what we've realized is that our digital infrastructure was not at a state in which it needed to be and still isn't at a state in which it's needed to be in terms of being able to provide that equitable access that's needed.

And so it's something that we've been looking at not only digital infrastructure, but thinking about the multi-dimensional needs of infrastructure from physical, digital, and social with oftentimes digital being the underbelly that's needed. What's the role of being able to really design, govern, and most importantly, what we've seen, especially with the infrastructure funding that came through, how do you fund this infrastructure to make sure people have access to that? And so again, being the fact that we are living in such a tech-driven society, if you don't even have the fundamental elements of connectivity, you're already facing obstacles and challenges that are putting you behind. And so that's something that we've really been looking at, especially in places like rural America and others to really create the connectivity and digital infrastructure that's needed to then connect to both the physical and social infrastructure that you're going to be able to face in the workforce.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

In your philanthropy, have you come across any groups or organizations that you think are doing this well?

Josh Elder, Siegel Family Endowment VP and head of grantmaking:

Yeah, I think we were actually just having a conversation as a team with one of our grantees, Connect Humanity, where we were really interested in looking at the work that they were doing around connectivity, particularly in Appalachia, and trying to understand and look at the different factors that were needed in order to build and create sustainable digital infrastructure to connect citizens. And so it's been just fascinating to look at and understand how they are trying to both look at this from a research standpoint, to be able to create a model that isn't necessarily a playbook that you're going to be handed and say, "Okay, if you're in this rural community, implement this." But it will create a starting point in which you can then start from and then contextualize based off of what are the resources that you currently have in your place, and then what are the kind of resources that you need to acquire, and then how can you leverage that from the different connections and others that are out there doing similar work.

And so it's just been fascinating to see what they are uncovering and then how they want to connect to other communities, whether it is in rural or suburban or urban, to be able to really build a solid sustainable infrastructure, especially around digital infrastructure and connectivity.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

In the rural areas, there's a couple of things that I think are at play there too. The connectivity is one issue. Although I think we saw during the pandemic, this lack of broadband access in people's homes in the urban areas was just as bad.

Josh Elder, Siegel Family Endowment VP and head of grantmaking:

Absolutely.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Kids sitting in parking lots outside their library connecting to do their homework. So one of the other things though too, is that while there's a migration going on in the country, that tends to be going toward the urban areas. So you're not having as many job opportunities in the rural areas. So that workforce development, which often comes out of what does an employer need in your community, a lot of that development is around that, I think there's a special challenge in the rural areas. It's an older population now. There's younger people moving out when they can. How are you seeing that addressed?

Josh Elder, Siegel Family Endowment VP and head of grantmaking:

Yeah. I speak as someone who grew up in rural America and realized early on, I felt like I had to move out in order to be able to find the opportunities or pursue opportunities for things that I was interested in. And I know some of that unfortunately is still the case, but I think what we have been seeing, especially in our rural innovation work, in rural workforce ecosystems, I think in large part to organizations and partners like CORI, the Center on Rural Innovation, trying to figure out how to create opportunities that exist within rural America that can keep people that choose to stay in their communities.

And I think if we go back to thinking about the pandemic, connectivity, yes, is important, but also one of the things that we've seen the increase in the horizon is thinking about the world of remote work and the world of possibilities for jobs. We can maybe argue whether or not those jobs are providing a livable wage, which we need to be advocating and fighting for, but one of the things that has created, I think, some opportunity, there are opportunities that didn't exist pre-pandemic to be able to have remote

work options. They're not as many as there should be, but I think what we are trying to do, especially with CORI and others, is how can you create rural innovation ecosystem and hubs that can provide more opportunities either for entrepreneurship or for other companies to be developed that can actually support and provide opportunities for citizens there and also grow talent pipelines because there's amazing talent that exists in these rural communities, they often just don't have connection to the opportunities to be able to build out for success.

And so I think really interested in looking at the connection between education, workforce and infrastructure needed to be able to scale these opportunities at a rapid rate.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I know you used the term learning and education learning. What are you seeing in that area, maybe starting with the connectivity or starting with the idea what's going on in rural America now to try to build up that workforce through education?

Josh Elder, Siegel Family Endowment VP and head of grantmaking:

Yeah. I think what we have seen in some of our early partnerships, one has been around just STEM, right? Again, if we think about AI broadly speaking and loop it into STEM, I think it's trying to provide opportunities for high quality and rigorous STEM education to be able to know what's out there, what are pathways that you can explore, and then how do you create a connection to what's happening inside of the K-12 system to what happens outside of the K-12 system, irrespective of whether you're choosing to grow directly into the workforce after grade 12, if you're choosing to pursue either a two-year or four-year degree, but creating the connection that's there and knowing what's possible.

And I think that's what we have seen, is that a lot of these students, and even like adults, when we talk about opportunities for upskilling and re-skilling, just have no idea what is out there. Even in rural America, there are opportunities that exist and sometimes there's education needed and human resources needed, so that social infrastructure, to be able to kind of show what are these opportunities and then how can you take advantage of them? And so we've seen these ecosystems and systemic approaches being built to realize that oftentimes everything is isolated and sometimes there's some bridge building that needs to happen. And so really working together to break down the silos and connect the dots and provide resources and pull those resources together has been really exciting to see. I think there's still a lot of work to be done, but people are really trying to move the needle to make it happen and make it more of the norm and not the exception.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

This intersection of learning, infrastructure, workforce, it all seems to come together on the idea that we need to create more economic opportunity. There is economic opportunity out there, but you need to get the word out about it. And when it works, it is a community effort.

Josh Elder, Siegel Family Endowment VP and head of grantmaking:

Absolutely. And I think that's the magic of it. That when it works, it is a community effort that is driven by the community. And I think that's what we have seen, again, going back to the rural piece of that, is that it involves every aspect of the community, which oftentimes brings challenges that are really complex. But that's the beauty and the magic, that this isn't something that just one person owns or one sector owns when you're in these rural environments. Everyone has to be a part. All stakeholders need to be engaged. And when that can happen, that's when it's truly going to stick and it's going to be

sustainable, and it's going to be something that can impact all and not some. I think that's what we're really pushing for, is that how do you make it equitable that everyone can get these opportunities and not just those that have been lucky or that had someone pass on information and knowledge about this opportunity existed, but other people didn't know about it. How do you create something that truly serves the entire community?

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Are you optimistic that that's going to happen?

Josh Elder, Siegel Family Endowment VP and head of grantmaking:

I feel like I have to be optimistic that it's going to happen. I mean, I don't want to be naive to say it's going to be easy by any stretch of the imagination, especially as someone who sits in philanthropy and knowing what I am talking about involves a lot of financial resources, human resources, social resources. So I want to be clear, I'm not being naive. But as someone who grew up in rural America and truly believes in it and goes back home to rural America, I have to be optimistic that this can happen, will happen, and should happen.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I share your optimism. And I'm not naive either, but I do believe that the work is being done and people have good intent and it will get done. It may take a little longer than we hope, but it will get done.

Josh Elder, Siegel Family Endowment VP and head of grantmaking:

Absolutely. I think the other piece that I have found, and this goes back to some of the work that we have been doing on the education and learning side, is that oftentimes we think about what works usually happens in the large metropolitan regions, and then we scale it down to rural. But we never think about scaling what's going on in some of these smaller places and scaling it up. I think we've seen there are pockets of excellence, and I think that's part of the frustration that they are pockets of excellence, and it's not the mainstream and the norm. But I think we have to do something to really challenge this narrative that there's great things happening in rural America and other places. The story just isn't being told. And how can we tell the story and think about how do we support that and contextualize it so it can scale and it's not a pocket of excellence, but it's truly like the north star that we're all working towards?

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Josh, thank you so much for sitting down with me.

Josh Elder, Siegel Family Endowment VP and head of grantmaking:

Excellent, Ramona. Thank you so much. This has been great.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I've been speaking with Josh Elder, vice president and head of Grantmaking for Siegel Family Endowment. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of WorkingNation. Thank you for listening.