

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.

Joining me today on the Work in Progress podcast is Taj Eldridge, managing director of JFF, Jobs for the Future. Taj, thank you for joining me.

Taj Eldridge, Jobs for the Future (JFF) managing director:

Ramona, great to be here. Thank you so much. Looking forward to this conversation,

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Our conversations are always around green energy, climate-resilient jobs, partly because of the CREST Initiative that JFF is part of, and we can talk about that a little bit in a few minutes.

Taj Eldridge, Jobs for the Future (JFF) managing director:

Yeah.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

But I love talking to you because I always feel like I get a really good idea of what the big picture is around climate-resilient jobs and just what's going on in the country. So give me a little idea of where we stand. How big is this industry right now?

Taj Eldridge, Jobs for the Future (JFF) managing director:

Yeah. Thanks, Ramona. When I think about the idea of the [inaudible 00:01:05] industry, I think about the time when we had this conversation on whether we should have websites or not, the conversation around bricks and clicks. If you remember the '90s, there was this whole conversation about, "Should we have this? The internet is here."

I remember the Today Show and Katie Couric was saying, "What is this internet?" And now, here we are. It is part of our lives. It is ubiquitous when we think about everything that we do, even the work we're doing here at [inaudible], that's going to be on several different streaming platforms.

So I think it's the same way with alternative energy with the green economy. People have heard me say that we're in the adolescent phase. We're still early because the great thing about this is that there are still dreamers out there while the entrepreneurs who are thinking about new ways to approach things, whether it's new battery technology that does not use things like cobalt and other things that are damaging so many communities, whether it's different ways of looking at the blue economy, which a lot of people forget to talk about when we talk about the green economy.

But I think from a massive financial standpoint, there's over \$5 trillion of opportunity globally that we look at. The reason I say globally and that's important is because we can't forget that even though there's domestic push for climate opportunities and resilience in this country, this is a global initiative. This is global. We can have the opportunity of exporting not only product but knowledge, but which I think is really important.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

It feels like that there is some momentum right now for this, that it's no longer just kind of a dream that there are a lot of organizations out there, a lot of companies that are doing things about it not only on an entrepreneurial level, but on a corporate level because almost every single major publicly traded corporation has some kind of resilience and efficiency in their kind of manifest.

Taj Eldridge, Jobs for the Future (JFF) managing director:

Absolutely. I think there's a combination of a few things. There's a combination of policy. We've seen the initial policy that's been really waking communities and companies and individuals about the importance of being sustainable, about the importance of how we utilize our resources, because at the end of the day, that's what all climate is about.

It's not about people arguing over the science. What it's about for me is about how do we utilize our resources effectively? Our resources can be the alternative energy that we're doing. It can be so many different other things. It could be hydrogen that's a new opportunity there. The reason I mention that is that I think that one of the things I've often talked about is that we have to have this transition, and the transition has to happen faster than what we need it to be. What's really interesting for me is that there's all these opportunities to get into this space.

I think also too, for years, recently, we've had a lot of corporations who've had their ESG, environmental social governance department kind of sending a loan. And now, we're seeing the opportunity to combine the CMO office, chief marketing office, with ESG on how companies are approaching these issues, how to combine the chief human resources officer with ESG and thinking about how do we recruit and look at the population that's there.

One thing I'll also say that's really kind of forcing a lot of companies to think about this is the advent of youth. And what I mean by that is that the population ages, the population changes, the needs of those populations change as well. We've often heard about this idea of quiet quitting, what a number of the populations in Gen Zs and others, but a lot of people don't realize, and it was spoken recently at an annual conference that we had by a young lady named Wawa Gatheru about climate quiet quitting, where people are trying to figure out, young people are trying to figure out how do they combine their personal goals in their lives and what they believe in with their professional lives.

And so I think those things are forcing that because those are part of the market too, and companies are responsive to the market, and I think that's changing the way that we look at the idea of environmental ESG and all the likes when we think about alternative and clean energy.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

On that corporate level, there is that domestic part of it. If you're a US-based company, you want to make your company greener for profit reasons because your shareholders are demanding it. But that also includes a global element, which is the supply chain that comes in. So I know there are a lot of companies, I believe Walmart was one of them that I had talked to somebody about last year, that are making sure that their global suppliers are talking, walking the talk as well.

Taj Eldridge, Jobs for the Future (JFF) managing director:

Absolutely. The scope three that impacts the suppliers for companies has been huge on really shining a light on that. It's interesting. Our partner within CREST which we'll talk about later on, is the World Resources Institute that does work in India for us as well with us with this project.

And we actually had the opportunity to speak at the ISM Conference, the Institute for Supply Chain Management Conference, about this very issue. And I think one of the things we have to also think

about going back to that transition is that there are a lot of smaller supply chain people or organizations or companies that are trying to make that transition themselves, and it's taken a little bit of time.

And so I think that what's happening here is that, again, this is where technology comes in at to make it more easier and more effective and efficient. And this is why I believe as a former founder, as a VC as well, that technology and entrepreneurship is going to be hugely important to these supply chains, to these corporations who partner there as well.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So when you talk about companies here and the young people who want to work for them or maybe start their own businesses and that green or blue energy is very important, but there's other jobs that really can play a part in this. You can be an HVAC technician, and you're doing green work. You want to make sure your air is clean or you want to be a plumber and make sure you don't lose water so you don't have any leaks.

Taj Eldridge, Jobs for the Future (JFF) managing director:

Yeah.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So how is that playing out? How are these jobs being identified, and how are we recruiting people?

Taj Eldridge, Jobs for the Future (JFF) managing director:

I would say I love when we talk about the types of jobs that are coming in climate. A lot of time, we focus on what I call the white collar jobs, the jobs that are for people who may have went to college or grad school. And we're seeing those changes with things like artificial intelligence.

With the advent of that, there's a greater need for cloud computing, which uses a lot of energy, which is going to really change the way engineers look at the way they're building products. So I think that's important. But when we look down to those positions, like you mentioned, these apprenticeship types of roles, those are going to be vastly important when the infrastructure comes. And what I'm excited about, there are several organizations like there's an organization called the Build A Man Project that's African American based, that really taking a lot of people from low-income communities and teaching them about things like plumbing and welding and saying that these are jobs where you can have a life and entrepreneurship, and it will be needed because the people who are learning these trades are no longer there.

And I think that's important because that's going to be some of the parts of it too. When we talk about HVAC, the other thing that's really interesting from an entrepreneurial standpoint that's happening is changing that is the advent of companies utilizing heat pumps or all these other types of technologies, one of which is a company called BlocPower that's based in New York that we may have talked about before utilizing that technology.

And I think the awareness is happening. Again, for me, it's really interesting to see often in the industry of workforce, we talk about pathways and how people come into these jobs, whether through education, whether through organizations. But quite honestly, in addition to that, there's social media. I was telling some of my colleagues, there's a young gentleman who has this Instagram account who does fishing, sustainable fishing. And he educates on it, but also he's become this superstar. And it reminds me of this show years ago, I think you and I talked about called Dirty Jobs.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Oh, yeah. Mike Rowe,

Taj Eldridge, Jobs for the Future (JFF) managing director:

Mike Rowe, phenomenal. Mike Rowe, if you're listening, please call me. But it talked about these jobs that are often forgotten. And I think we're seeing now as resurgence in these types of jobs as well for younger populations because of the need and also because of the fact that it has impact and it pays. So I think that's important.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So on the skilled trade idea, as you said, those are great paying jobs. A lot of them are union jobs. And with the Infrastructure and Jobs Act, there is a big demand. I just talked to somebody at McKinsey and they had just done a report on the need for these folks, and they need them to build roads. They need them to make them sustainable, which is part of the act.

Taj Eldridge, Jobs for the Future (JFF) managing director:

Yeah. And I think organizations like the BlueGreen Alliance that focuses on the union side is important. But again, Ramona, I look at it from a very holistic standpoint. I look at not only the jobs that are being created and the people who need these jobs, but I look at the wraparound services that are needed.

I look at the technologies that can help people in these jobs that have come from people thinking about the climate impact. A perfect example is that we have a lot of people in these things we talked about that are doing infrastructure jobs, working on roads. And there are technologies being built that help people stay cool in these type of positions as well, where we're seeing these ventilated jackets and these cooling jackets that allow people to work in the sun with less impact from the heat that we're seeing because of the impact of climate change.

And also, again, policies are working through that as well where we're seeing a number of different policies on the state side that are reducing the amount of time that workers are out in these weather and in the heat as well.

So I think the idea for us to think about the inclusion of workforce and climate needs to have a very big-tip strategy because there's a lot of parts that go into it. There's not just one way to get a pathway into a job. And I think that's great because not everybody's going to go to college. Not everyone is going to go to a two-year community college. Everyone's going to be able to have that type of pathway. So we need to have pathways that are about from high school to working from community college to this space, and then also from traditional college. And I think that's the thing that I love about the industry that we're working on it because the optionality that allows us to do that.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

There's also different needs in different communities. And one of the things the JFF CREST Initiative is doing, is looking at, it's a regional challenge, and I've had the pleasure of talking to the folks in North Carolina. I got to go down there and see what they're doing, rebuilding the textile industry.

In Portland, I know they're concerned about brush fires. In Colorado, clean air. And not that everybody's not worried about clean air or in Louisiana talking to them about the mitigation caused by the hurricanes.

One of the things that I'm fascinated by though is in these different regions, how you talk to people differently in those regions about what's going on.

Taj Eldridge, Jobs for the Future (JFF) managing director:

Yeah.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Some of them don't like the term green jobs. So you talk to them about those things that I just mentioned, clean air, brush fires, things that affect their lives. Are you seeing any resistance, any pushback?

Taj Eldridge, Jobs for the Future (JFF) managing director:

Yeah. I think that's been the way that we've started CREST from the very beginning, is language. I was a poetry major before I became an economist and working in the financial sector.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

That doesn't surprise me for some reason.

Taj Eldridge, Jobs for the Future (JFF) managing director:

So language is important, and I think language connects. And so you're right, a lot of the times in certain communities, we were framed from using words that may be what I call trigger words because there's a lack of education around it. And I think it will come.

But at the end of the day, when we're talking about green jobs, when we're talking about blue economy jobs, these are literally jobs of the future. And the reason I keep mentioning this from a global standpoint is whether or not we're still having this conversation in our country from a political standpoint, the world is moving towards it.

We're having different partners and different allies in the world that are looking for this opportunity around alternative energy. So I think it's important for us to take a look at that. I grew up in Texas. I live in California, so I understand the nuance of language. I understand how language can be community because there's a bit of comfort in language for certain communities.

So yes, I think it's been really important to do that. I think once we start being very rigid on the language that we're using, I think once we start being rigid on, you have to say this is what this is, I think, then you'll get pushback. But at the end of the day, jobs are tied to employers. Employers have a goal, and we have to speak the language of the employers as well in addition to speaking the language of those of us who want to see a brighter, cleaner future.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So we've mentioned CREST a couple of times. Why don't you tell the audience who may not know what CREST is?

Taj Eldridge, Jobs for the Future (JFF) managing director:

Absolutely. And like the government, we love acronyms. So CREST stands for Climate-Resilient Employees for Sustainable Tomorrow. This initiative was funded by the Ares Charitable Foundation. And

it partners Jobs for the Future along with World Resources Institute. And I love it because the importance of it shows the global impact that I've been saying.

For the US, we've been focusing on training and placing over 25,000 Americans into quality green jobs. And I can talk about the why we say quality in a second on that. And also in India, we look at how can we impact and work with micro and small medium enterprises when it comes to climate resilience.

And I think it's a great initiative because again, it combines these two worlds where there could be cross-cultural learning about it. Our team had the opportunity to go to Mumbai with you as well. And we had a lot of learning that it's so similar to what we've seen in the United States and vice versa, what we've talked about ways that we've done things in the United States that can influence the community of employers in India.

And with CREST, we take this multi-tiered approach. So it's not only us having these conversations like we're having now to talk about the future of work in this space, but it's also work with entrepreneurial workers who in the space of climate, but also FinTech and financial wellness, because one of the things we want to talk about is that it's not only about getting people into these jobs, but it's also ensuring that people stay in these jobs.

And we know the financial aspect of it is hugely important. The other pieces of it, like you mentioned, other regional challenge where we've worked with a number of different regions to really help them think about ways to attract their stakeholders to jobs in the region. And it goes back to what you just said, Ramona, about what I call place-based innovation, where you're making the job opportunities relevant towards that community.

If it will. I'll give you a story. When I was visiting Portland, we were talking about this where one automaker, and I'll refrain from saying the automaker's name, they had a facility there and they were trying to get people to work for that facility. The story goes is that some of the people were going there, did not want to go there because they thought it was not going to do well because they saw other types of vehicles SA the road all of the time.

And so that's a perfect example of how influence of locality or proximity is important when we're talking about the type of job opportunities, how people come to it and the way people are thinking about it as well.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And quality, you mentioned quality. Quality jobs are definitely a key of our mission as well, is to put people on the pathways or tell them about these quality jobs. What's your definition of a quality job?

Taj Eldridge, Jobs for the Future (JFF) managing director:

Absolutely. When I was growing up, and I came from a very poor community within Dallas, Texas, majority African American community in Dallas, Texas. And for me, quality was the amount of money you were making. But as I got older and also looking at what JFF starts looking at, it's more than that. It is the way the worker is treated.

It goes from standpoint of being able to take time off when you need to do things of that nature. It goes through is there opportunity for advancement? It can even be things around the idea of what are the services around that are helping you with this space of it. One simple thing I often thought about and we were having this conversation was that a lot of places you think of some banks and some other areas post offices, they all close at five. But what if you work nine to five and you don't have an opportunity to have a great PTO or a flexible work hour? And that really impacts a lot of things that you're doing.

And so the idea of the Quality Jobs framework, which is on JFF's website, really influences a lot of the work that we do in the climate space because one of the things we have to realize is that not all green jobs can be quality or quality, and there's an aspect of it. But one of the things we do believe is that all jobs have the ability to be green clean jobs. And the reason for that is because, again, it is about how do we utilize our resources?

So we talked about the idea of artificial intelligence, how that can have a climate lens. We talked about the idea of in a previous conversation about apparel, and you mentioned the industrial commons, which is one of our challenge members in North Carolina that works in this space. So the great thing about that is that it gives this, again, the optionality of the type of jobs that are out there.

So people just can realize when we talk about green jobs, it's not just solar and it's not just transportation. It is so much more.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And you mentioned, and before we go into the entrepreneur part of this, you mentioned blue energy. Can you explain that for the audience and me a little bit more that doesn't quite understand it? I think I have a bit of a handle on it, but I'd love to hear your explanation.

Taj Eldridge, Jobs for the Future (JFF) managing director:

Absolutely. One of the members of our entrepreneurs in residence is a company by the name of Julius Education, which does a lot of work in helping companies and people get prepared for jobs in the green economy space. The actual founder of their organization also co-founded this organization called Imagination H2O. And when I think about the blue economy and the work that they do at Imagination H2O, it's really all the types of resources that are utilized on the coast and the ocean areas.

We're here in California, huge coastal community. Think about New Orleans, another coastal community. We think about Florida as well, even along the East coast. It is what are these technologies that can help assist on that end? But then you think about it, it's a global, I went to school in Chile in [inaudible 00:18:51], and there's a huge coastline where they have a huge blue economy that's there. And some of their technologies that are there are really interesting.

There's a company here based in LA that puts these buoys out in the ocean. And as they go up and down, it creates energy, and it comes back to the shore. It's an opportunity for the energy to be harnessed with generators. Another company is building this idea of the Roomba of the ocean that is going out and cleaning the ocean that's close to the area, so it can make sure we have good strong coral reefs and all these lifestyles that we needed there as those of us, like myself love seafood.

So we'll make sure that we have really great opportunities there. But I think both of those things are important. And we'll see this idea as we talk about the green economy, as we talk about the blue ocean economy. It's important for the audience and the workers to understand that these are job opportunities when you hear these terms.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

We mentioned the Entrepreneur in Residence program, the entrepreneurs. Tell me how you're working with them through the CREST Initiative to create job opportunities.

Taj Eldridge, Jobs for the Future (JFF) managing director:

Yeah. We have some really great companies that are in this space and very diverse. I've mentioned one, Julius Education. It works a lot with companies and other areas to really prepare people for jobs in the green economy.

One of the other areas that I love coming from the idea of what a green economy job is agriculture. We have a company called Renewable that focuses on this idea of food waste and waste in this space. There's another company that's really in this space called Frontline Gig that helps people transition with these temporary jobs in the space.

The whole idea of us starting the Entrepreneur in Residence as part of CREST is to think about how can the regions, again, be aware of these other type of job opportunities that are there that they might not think about, because those are things are, again, we are in an adolescent phase of the green economy, and we have two parts to our Entrepreneur-in-Residence.

We have this part that I mentioned with the climate cohort, with these companies that are focusing on what are these opportunities in climate, whether it's the training piece of it, whether it's the agriculture piece of it, whether it's the maternal materials piece of it.

The second core we have is on the financial wellness side. And again, the reason why that's important is that, again, we talked about this idea of we not only want people to get jobs in the space, but we want them to stay in these jobs. And financial wellness is a huge part of that.

For me, it goes back to this idea of we can't just train people for jobs and think we're done. We have to ensure that there are wraparound services to help people and their lives, their lives change in this space. And so some of the companies there are focused on this idea of how people utilize debt, how people utilize their paycheck, and what alternative capital they're going forward. So I think both of those entrepreneurs and residents programs are really important for the type of outcome that we want to see of those 25,000 people trained in placing in clean quality green jobs.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

What kind of support are you giving those entrepreneurs? Are they getting advice? Are they getting money? Are they getting both?

Taj Eldridge, Jobs for the Future (JFF) managing director:

Definitely. The entrepreneurs get a stipend to participate in the program, and the program has led by two phenomenal people, Heather Terenzio and Lauren Lannitto. They've been doing this for JFF for a while. So they have a foundation that's been really great for that. But what I think when I talk to the founders, and I just talked to one today, what they say they love about it is JFF's connections and network.

I'll often tell founders that when you start in a company, it's really about the four Cs. Yes, everybody goes to access to capital first C, but there's also access to customers, access to connections and access to culture. When I talk about culture, I mean the culture of doing it right the first time. I mean a culture of ensuring that you have the right pathway to get what you need that's done, and a culture of once you get the money in from the investment, how do you spend it wisely?

How do you have the right communications and networking contacts to make sure you're spending your money you're getting from investors more effectively? And so I think those are the things that entrepreneurs see. When I was a founder, I used to think, "All I need is money and that will be it."

And then when I got money, I realized "I need way more than that." So I think advice, and they have a lot of mentors and guest speakers that come to the companies both for the climate cohort and the



financial wellness cohort that I think are really important for these companies to thrive. And then also one of the things we take a look at is how can we connect these companies and the technologies they're doing to the regions and assure that the stakeholders in the regions, the people that the regions are working with, have access to some of these financial inclusive tools or have access to some of these tools working with some of these climate cohort companies.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I just saw a stat that 55% of the new jobs over the last decade have been started by small businesses. So there is opportunity. Do you feel that there are enough of these small businesses out there, entrepreneurs who are really focused on this area so that they can scale up and that we can put a lot more than even the 25,000 to work?

Taj Eldridge, Jobs for the Future (JFF) managing director:

Yeah, I think so. I think the landscape has changed post-COVID because as we all know, between the CHIPS Act, between the IRA and so many different other federal policies, that has unlocked some funding that's been out there for small businesses to take advantage of and to utilize it to grow and scale.

I think there's been private capital and me coming from having a private capital background and venture capital, I think we've seen the rise of a number of public and private partnerships, and they come into this space. I think small businesses are the heartbeat of our country. That's what I get excited about when I see these opportunities where people see something that needs to be filled, a solution that needs to occur.

And I think some of these solutions happening from people just having these conversations. Somebody might hear us talking about some issues that some region or some entrepreneur are having or some people were looking to have and they see a need. One of the things I think about, we talk about this idea of people who did not go to pathways, different pathways, and they may go to apprenticeship.

Well, how do you let employers know what type of credentials that you have? So that leads to opportunities around digital wallets and digital credentials, which we're working with a JFF. That's exciting to me when we have these conversations. And when I see problems, I see opportunity. And I think that's the mindset of a lot of different founders in this country.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Where is a surprising area that maybe an entrepreneur has stepped into and you go, "Oh, I didn't think about that," or what is an opportunity you think somebody should step in to fill?

Taj Eldridge, Jobs for the Future (JFF) managing director:

It's interesting. I keep it real simple, and I keep it because we're post-Olympics. As many people know, hopefully, people had the opportunity to watch Paris, the Olympics there. And of course, we're going to bring it back here to LA in four years. And the mayor of LA, Mayor Bassett says she wants a car-free Olympics. So this can create a lot of opportunities to really think about how do we move people? How do we effectively move people?

And I think what's interesting to me is that America is so much based on rugged individualism. And I think even in California, it goes down to our vehicles. We have a love affair of vehicles that's lasted so many years. So I think it's going to be an opportunity to change behavior. I get excited, not necessarily

about just the hardware opportunities, and I think they're there. But I get excited about how behaviors are changed.

When I think about that, I think about the language that we use. We don't say, "We're sending some back somebody a package." We say, "We're FedExing someone." We don't say, "We're searching on the internet for someone." We say we're, "Googling someone." And I think some of that change and behavior needs to occur in the climate space of how we're utilizing resources, how we're thinking about movement of people. That's exciting for me to see.

Lastly, I would think too, what I'm really excited about is, again, the behavior is changing. We see a lot of young people changing the way we eat and how the things we're doing, how our food is being grown, the type of food is being grown. That's really exciting for me as well. And Ramona, I'll tell you, I'm probably one of the oldest people that's on TikTok and Instagram looking at all these reels.

And I get excited when I see a lot of these young people on there, a lot of Gen Zs, and even Gen Alpha was talking about what they want to see in the future. And I think that gets us excited because that gives us an opportunity to lay the foundation of what we can build to help them achieve those goals, either working with a company, having a job where they're fulfilled, or really encouraging the entrepreneurship in this space.

And I think that is what Jobs of the Future is about. It's not only about making sure that we're reducing the barriers for people today, the 75 million that we want to impact for our North Star, but it's also laying the foundation for the future long after I'm gone. And that's what I'm excited about.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Taj, thank you much.

Taj Eldridge, Jobs for the Future (JFF) managing director:

Thank you so much.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Always a pleasure.

Taj Eldridge, Jobs for the Future (JFF) managing director:

Absolutely. Thank you.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I've been speaking with Taj Eldridge, managing director for JFF. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of WorkingNation. Thank you for listening.