

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.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Last month in Minneapolis, I was at the National Fund for Workforce Solutions Annual Conference. There, I had a chance to sit down with workforce practitioners, employers, funders, and other community partners to talk about the best way to elevate workforce solutions. Here is one of those conversations.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Joining me on Work in Progress is Todd Greene, executive director of WorkRise. Todd, thank you for sitting down with me at the Shift Conference.

Todd Greene, WorkRise executive director:

Thank you for having me.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

When this is published, you will be holding your own conference, virtual conference, for WorkRise. Tell me first, what does WorkRise do? What is your role in this workforce develop mission?

Todd Greene, WorkRise executive director:

There are so many important intermediaries who are helping to address the issues surrounding economic mobility in the workforce and how we create better opportunities for so many people who've been left behind in society. The labor market, of course, is a big contributor to that. WorkRise is really about building out the research, certainly there's a lot of research that already exist, but there are still questions that perhaps we don't have all of the answers for, but taking the research that already exists and building out additional research and putting that into a framework that can help to create more action and solutions that can address real economic mobility. I'll just say that our premise is really research to action.

Todd Greene, WorkRise executive director:

We also endeavor to really bring together a larger group of stakeholders who can work together to craft these solutions so that everyone is operating from perhaps a common evidence base, but also that can craft and make decisions about solutions that have greater buy in and opportunities to make meaningful difference around economic mobility.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

To get to the solutions, you have to talk a little bit about what the barriers are. What do you see as the major barriers right now in the labor market?

Todd Greene, WorkRise executive director:

When one takes that question, Ramona, if I was to ask an employer, an employer might say a big barrier in the labor market is I don't have people to show up and who can come to work or who present with the set of skills that meet my expectations for what I need to accomplish my business needs.

Todd Greene, WorkRise executive director:

On the other hand, if you ask the worker about what's really important or what isn't working, and one of the opportunities that we see or that we hear from workers is that many things aren't working. This isn't just true for this moment in time that we find ourselves in, but this has been true for the past four decades, that these workers' wages are not keeping up with where they need to go economically to be successful, but there are other issues that are also very important, issues around how they're being treated and dignity and respect. But more generally, there are opportunities about how they're accessing training, what types of training, what information they're presented with that's really going to create the outcomes that they want to see to enhance their own mobility.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

On the employer side, they say they don't find enough people with the skills. Do you have any indication in the data that the employers are actually working to make sure that their workforce, or those that they're hiring, get those skills? I've seen some employer back training out there, but as a whole, as an aggregate, do you feel like that's being done?

Todd Greene, WorkRise executive director:

I certainly believe that there needs to be continued investment from employers in order to help to access the labor market that they seek. The first frame that I would present is that we are at a point where we should be thinking differently about the value of workers within the context of employers. In the past, I think employers have thought about workers as a cog in the wheel, but perhaps if we reframe that thinking and if we view workers more as an investment in our process or an investment in terms of reaching our goals, then I think that also helps to shift our thinking about how we view workers.

Todd Greene, WorkRise executive director:

With respect to that, we engage a lot of employers. Of course, many of them are now saying it's about pay and I'm paying my workers more. Well, the reality of it is, is that perhaps you need to pay more than what you're paying them. While we've seen these increases in wages, I think there is some question about whether or not the wage increases really match what's happening in this hyper-inflationary environment in which we find ourselves. Are workers really winning, are they really keeping up? I think that's a really fundamental question.

Todd Greene, WorkRise executive director:

In addition to the wage issue, we've talked about benefits, we've also talked about opportunities for advancement within the company, how our individuals present it with opportunities around hiring, not just hiring, but also promotion. What are they going to encounter? How can employers invest in providing workers with better skills? How are jobs designed? Are they designed in a way that workers can feel like they are contributing and have some autonomy in terms of that?

Todd Greene, WorkRise executive director:

Then a couple of other issues that I think are really important that employers are beginning to address, and that has to do with how are we thinking about scheduling workers? We are recording this and using some very innovative technology. Technology has certainly been a big pathway toward how we're achieving efficiency with the labor market, but at the same time, that's also created some challenges. When we think about scheduling algorithms, for example, and how employers are thinking about providing workers with predictable schedules, or in many cases not predictable schedules, where employees have a different schedule from week to week or from hour to hour based upon the employer need, but that really is an impediment toward an individual being able to access training that will help them to move on or to advance in their own career. That also, by the way, can help the company themselves, in terms of what that worker's able to contribute.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You've probably seen the data as well, we've all seen the data, that says it actually costs more to go outside and hire someone than to look inside and find that talent and cultivate it. You get a much more loyal worker if they see that there's roles in places that they can advance.

Todd Greene, WorkRise executive director:

Absolutely. I think employers, particularly as we move forward into this continued tight labor market, that employers are really embracing that concept, or the ones that are succeeding are ones that are going to continue to embrace that concept. I'll just also add to that perspective as well, beyond seeking opportunities for workers to advance themselves, I've already hinted at this, but how are workers being treated? Do they have opportunities to express themselves and to have some say so about? That's a concept that I think we're going to see more of.

Todd Greene, WorkRise executive director:

It's not just a generational thing. I think people like to say, "Oh, well that's just such a Generation Z concept," but really we're seeing more of that movement. Perhaps the pandemic has hastened that aspect about workers want to have more say about their working conditions and also their job design. I think employers who are going to win this battle for labor are going to be the ones that understand that.

Todd Greene, WorkRise executive director:

The other part that I'll mention too, with respect to how employers are accessing workers, is that we've got to think more inclusively about who works and who's a part of our workforce. A lot of companies have adopted many diversity, equity, and inclusion frameworks. While this is not anything new, the reality of it is is that employers are going to have to think differently about how they're accessing minority workers, immigrant workers. Those are going to be individuals who perhaps aren't necessarily the primary targets of some employers, but we've got to think differently about how we want to engage and bring them into the workforce in a way that can add value to the company.

Todd Greene, WorkRise executive director:

That might mean earlier investments in early childhood education and in high schools and in technical programs to help to support those workers, so that when they are ready for the workforce that they are on a more equal playing field so that they can be competitive in our work. Look, we need these people in our workforce, and so it's up to all of us to figure out and to redouble our efforts in looking for opportunities to engage that broader segment.

Todd Greene, WorkRise executive director:

Then finally, I'll just add to this, even though we've seen these diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts, in some places it may be perfunctory. Is this really durable? Are we going to see our employers really making changes, and are those changes permeating throughout the organization? While the CEO might be speaking of this, about diversity, equity and inclusion, how is that really permeating into lower levels and all levels of that particular employer or organization in order to really see the types of difference that we want to see?

Todd Greene, WorkRise executive director:

If a frontline supervisor has not bought into that, maybe they never will, but at least it's important for that organization to have metrics and policies and programs in place to ensure that regardless of the attitude of that individual frontline supervisor that these opportunities for all workers are embraced and activated upon across the enterprise.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

There is this movement that they call tear the paper ceiling, and it's about skills-based hiring. Among those groups that employers should be looking at are people who don't have a four-year degree, who have skills, they may have learned them on the job. There's this screening algorithm that happens that keeps people without a four-year degree into some of these better paying jobs. It seems to me that would be a trend that employers should be looking at.

Todd Greene, WorkRise executive director:

Definitely. I should say that there are a number of employer groups, the Business Roundtable would be one example of that, that's really looking beyond what is going to be necessary for an individual to be successful and to think about what skills and experiences and to value those in a meaningful way. It goes beyond an issue of what employers want to do, it's really a cultural issue as well. I think it's going to be important for society as a whole to also embrace that ability to do that.

Todd Greene, WorkRise executive director:

Once again, it's one thing for an employer leader to say, "I'm interested in skills space hiring," but if I grew up and I'm a frontline supervisor and I grew up in an environment where I needed to have a degree, then I've got to undo my own biases about what that really means when I'm hiring a person into a level and how do I change my own frame of what's really necessary to get the job done and what do we want to see.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

One of the conversations that's happening at this conference, and I'm sure is happening elsewhere, perhaps at your own conference, is the definition of a good job. Something that came up and I've heard in the last couple of months is talking about jobs in the sense of purpose and dignity. You want some kind of job that you can take care of your family, you have a sense of pride in doing it and sense of dignity. How important is that for the employer to create that atmosphere?

Todd Greene, WorkRise executive director:

Well, it's very important. This particular labor shortage situation that we find ourselves in is really worldwide. This isn't something that we're going to resolve next year or the year after. We'll be in this

situation for a while, so it's really important for workers to think differently about how they are structuring the job and how they value workers.

Todd Greene, WorkRise executive director:

Once again, referring back to that, there's a lot of evidence and different frameworks about what constitutes a good job, but you've talked about many of those elements that talk about wages and benefits and opportunities to advance, workplaces that are safe. We take for granted that all work environments are safe, but we just learned in the pandemic that it isn't a given that employees are going to be going into a work environment that's safe. They also want an environment that's free of discrimination. We've got to think about what are those aspects.

Todd Greene, WorkRise executive director:

I'll also just mention that when we think about work, it's also important for us to think, and progressive employers or employers who are going to ultimately win, are also going to be thinking about some of these other factors that are necessary. I call them some of the social determinants of work. How do we think about housing? Do I have locations or am I making arrangements that are in places where people have access to affordable housing? Am I located in those places? Am I thinking about the transportation infrastructure? In other words, if I'm an employer and it takes an hour and a half because I'm located in some far distant northern suburb and a population that I see lives in a different place, then are there opportunities around transportation subsidies or van pools or other things that I could do to support that?

Todd Greene, WorkRise executive director:

Then the big one, the very big one that really needs more focus, is around childcare. How are we addressing those needs of attaching more individuals into the workplace? We know childcare is much more correlated to female workers than the male workers, but still, there's a childcare expectation on both. We've got to think about how employers can assist in terms of scheduling design or of providing some sort of subsidy to assist workers in addressing their childcare needs.

Todd Greene, WorkRise executive director:

Then finally, I don't want to just talk about childcare in that context, even though it's such a big deal, there's family care. We also are seeing many more multi-generational families. There are lots of expectations that people have around elder care, for example. It's going to be important for us to think about providing maybe paid leads or other types of opportunities when strong workers need to be away from the workforce for whatever the circumstance might occur, that they have an opportunity to reconnect and reattach themselves to an employer even when life happens.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You mentioned that location is important, you want to make sure there's transportation. Solutions are local, solutions for the employer are local and for the worker. Is there a policy element to any of this that you would call out, that you would say local government needs to do this, federal government needs to do this?

Todd Greene, WorkRise executive director:

Absolutely. There are numerous opportunities here. I'll just speak about one, and that is Mayor Dickens in Atlanta has begun to think differently about economic development policy. Of course, many communities, states, cities, et cetera, have made investments in economic development incentives. That is, how can I utilize tax dollars or public dollars in a way to attract an employer or to incense an employer to expand their business with the idea that that kind of economic activity that that business is going to create can really create bigger opportunities and more economic activity for that city or region.

Todd Greene, WorkRise executive director:

We're really beginning to rethink a lot of these models, because in many cases, even though these types of public incentives have been offered, they have not necessarily come with additional caveats. Generally, it's around the number of jobs and the amount of capital investment, but perhaps we need to think differently about whether or not those types of outcomes are really producing what we would expect to see.

Todd Greene, WorkRise executive director:

Atlanta is a good example, where Mayor Dickens is based. Here, this is a city that has achieved enormous economic prosperity over the last 40 years. It's home to numerous corporate headquarters that have been recruited even over the last 20 years, but yet, when we look at the economic outcomes of the, and I'm going to use this word provocatively, of the indigenous people, we know that Atlanta generally rates lowest among 49 or 50 of the top metropolitan cities with respect to economic mobility. How did this happen? On the one hand, we've achieved all of this enormous success by recruiting these companies, but yet on the other hand, this hasn't benefited. We haven't seen these opportunities be captured by the people who've been there and who've been paying taxes.

Todd Greene, WorkRise executive director:

That necessarily creates an opportunity for policy makers, like mayors or governors, to rethink incentive structures about, well, maybe I need to add some additional aspects as I'm thinking about bringing these types of companies to my community. Are there opportunities for me to think about, does this company provide pathways for mobility as I'm structuring my incentive program? Do they provide tuition reimbursement, do they provide paid leave, do they provide childcare, all of these other types of indicators that we know are really going to be successful and are important to mobility.

Todd Greene, WorkRise executive director:

There's also this wage aspect. Typically a lot of economic development incentives are structured along a wage dimension, but beyond the wage dimension, I've talked about benefits, are there paid benefits? We've got to think more comprehensively about these types of programs. I think Mayor Dickens in Atlanta is in the vanguard of leading some of these efforts around economic development policies, for example, that can be utilized to support those types of opportunities.

Todd Greene, WorkRise executive director:

Then maybe the other policy that I'll mention that certainly local mayors and others have an opportunity to also move forward is around procurement policies. How can local government, state government, and others utilize the enormous power that they have in procurement to ensure that those procurement dollars are really moving to employers and being accessed by only those employers who are providing these economic mobility opportunities for their employees, not just wages, but in many of these other factors that we know can contribute to mobility.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Todd Greene, thank you very much for sitting down and talking to me.

Todd Greene, WorkRise executive director:

Thank you, my pleasure.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I've been speaking to Todd Greene, executive director of WorkRise. The conference is virtual, starts today, October 18th, and runs for the next three days. Find the link on our website. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-i-chief of WorkingNation. Thank you for listening.