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 at the Aspen Ideas Festival with Vilas Dhar, President of the Patrick J. McGovern Foundation. Vilas, thank you for joining me because I love talking to you about AI and its impact on our society, but also on our workforce. So welcome.

Vilas Dhar, Patrick J. McGovern Foundation President:

Ramona, thank you so much for the invitation. I love our conversations. This is going to be fun.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

I agree. Let's start. AI, that ChatGPT conversation really kind of kicked in November of 2022, I think it was. There's been a lot of concern and caution, but also some optimism around AI on what it can do. Where do you think we are in implementing it?

Vilas Dhar, Patrick J. McGovern Foundation President:

That's a great question and let's start by giving a little bit of context for our listeners. AI didn't start in November of 2022, researchers, scholars, people like me have been building AI products for decades. What happened in 2022 though was a particularly important social moment, not a technological one. The idea that AI moved out of the background, out of the shadows and became something that every person on the planet could touch, feel, interact with, see how it might influence their lives. And because of that, we entered into this new phase of a discussion that moved from what does the technology do to what do humans have to do to be ready for the technology?

I think that's a very positive frame. What it also did though was it showed us that so many of the things that we had worried about for years and decades about who might own these tools, who might build them, who might use them to create negative outcomes wasn't something we could consider an abstraction. It was something we had to come up with real responses to right now. So you asked what moment are we in? I think that's the moment. This is no longer a moment about the newest, fanciest bells and whistles of the next AI product.

It's a moment of necessary introspection where we ask ourselves what kind of society do we want to build and how will AI help us get there?

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

Who's leading that conversation? Is it government policymakers? Is it advocates? Is it people like you have spent your life looking at this? Who's leading that?

Vilas Dhar, Patrick J. McGovern Foundation President:

Well, I never want to say it's the wrong people leading it, Ramona, but I do think it's not enough of the right people. What's happened because of the last 20 years of technology development is I think we as a society have given a really significant point of view and a prominence to technologists, to the CEOs of the big tech companies that we all know who they are. But we've asked them to do more than just tell us what the technology does, we've also given them some prominence in defining what our society does because of it. The social media challenges that we've had over the last few years are a good example of this.

What we need is to bring a new set of folks to the table, and to me this is a pretty clearly defined set. It's certainly the technologists in big tech. We need them at the table. They are the primary sources of capitalist innovation and research and development. We need regulators and policymakers, the people who are trying to figure out how we protect against the greatest possible harms, but then we need a whole new set of folks. We need civil society and communities to talk about how we might actually use these tools to advance community interests. We need employers to think about the future of the workforce.

We need students and early career professionals who are trying to figure out how these tools will directly impact them and across any number of domains that could give you a similar frame. We need not just hospital CEOs, we need doctors and nurses, and we need patients. What we need, Ramona, is a new way of thinking about participatory decision making in a tech-enabled world, and it's not revolutionary. In fact, the last time we did this was maybe the American Revolution, where we said decisions about political power shouldn't be made by somebody who sits far away in a place of privilege.

Here in America, it became the mandate for every single American to get involved in what kind of society we would build. Now, look, that might sound quite hopeful. I know that the pragmatic reality is we're not going to get every person on the planet involved in decisions about AI, but I think if we begin to structure these conversations with the intention to say at least we're going to look for viewpoints from diverse communities and different kinds of profiles. That we're not going to rely exclusively on the discussion between a technology creator and a policy regulator to make decisions for all the rest of us, then that's a great starting point.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

I feel like that AI is still unknowable to many people. There are a lot of people in that strata of society that maybe we have talked about that are participating now, but to someone who is working in a manufacturing plant, to them AI just means their job's going to be taken away. How do you explain to someone who might be fearful of that, what AI might be able to do for them on the positive side?

Vilas Dhar, Patrick J. McGovern Foundation President:

It's exactly the right question, Ramona. When I joined my current role as the head of a new multi-billion dollar philanthropy, one of my very first commitments was to say we would never build a skyscraper office to house our staff. Instead, we'd ask our staff to go out and meet with communities where they are. I've had a chance over the last few years to travel from east to west, north to south across America, and really all across the world talking to communities about exactly the questions you just raised. And you're exactly right. Most Americans to this day still haven't really engaged with an AI product.

They might've used ChatGPT or something else with intention. But at the same time, we recognize that most Americans today, according to studies, are interacting with 60 to 70 AI enabled systems every day of their lives without even knowing about it. From their cell phone enabled mapping product to the ways that they interact with one of those terribly annoying robotic voices when you call in for customer service. So on one side we have this question of do people feel like they're interacting with AI or not? And often the answer is no, but they're very quickly able to discern where those points of contact are.

And then the second is, what are the social and cultural stories that we've told about AI that are influencing how people think about it? I'm a big fan of science fiction movies and Hollywood and all of its forms, but I know that the stories we're being told about AI are mostly about Terminators and Skynet and robots that'll take over. That's not the lived experience of any American, so what we have to do now

is bridge the gap. We have to broaden the conversation from where the headlines are. The headlines, as you know, have been co-opted.

We talk so much more about the safety and risk and existential risk of these possible systems and so little about what it means to have public ownership or how these tools might actually create benefits and new opportunities. You're right that people are worried about their jobs, and we should talk about that a lot more, but I'm curious where the counter-narrative is about how AI is actually helping people build incredible new skills, use these tools to do creative and aspirational things, to actually invest in the idea that if we could own these tools ourselves rather than having to rely on the big tech companies, I trust human ingenuity to come up with amazing ways to use AI to create a better human experience.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

How do you think it's being used now or can you give me some examples on how I might be, no matter what my job is, maybe I'm a skilled trade worker or maybe I am a data analyst? How is it being used now?

Vilas Dhar, Patrick J. McGovern Foundation President:

Let's start with the triptych that I often use. The story that for so long technology has been something that's been done to us. Let's start there. As customers, as consumers, as citizens, often the companies that have the most capital have invested the most in these systems that have built tools that change our experience for their benefit. You might think about online shopping where any commerce site is using AI and data analytics to steer us to goods that we should buy based on what their profitability looks like. Or systems that change the way our health decisions might be made for us to reduce costs for a pharmaceutical provider.

Or so many more, automation in the workplace where it's really being used to goose corporate profits rather than create a more holistic and positive experience for a worker. That's where technology is being done to us. It's where companies are investing in and spending money to build systems that often are to their benefit and very rarely to ours. There's a second category that gives me a little bit more hope. Those places where technology is being used, created and deployed for us. I think about things like community organizations that are using these systems to increase access to healthcare.

Helping people use AI enabled review services to know where they might go to get better care for their particular condition. Or where technology is being built that trains and creates new skills that are through organizations like Per Scholas or through amazing training organizations all across the country, creating new ways to get education that don't rely on the high cost version of having a human teacher. And then finally, the category that I care about most, the ones where technology is being created by us, and this is really where I think about communities that are stepping forward to say we're facing local challenges that matter.

How do we build tools that actually help us step over them? I think about an organization called ISeeChange that has built an AI enabled tool that lets citizens report how climate effects are affecting their own neighborhoods. To take a picture of a storm drain that floods every time there's a major rain event and share that data up to be aggregated and shared with policymakers so that city and urban planners know where to better allocate the money that they have for fixes or infrastructure development. All of these tools use AI. They use AI in incredibly creative ways, but I think you see even as we go down that spectrum, the change in intention, in outcome, in for whom these tools are being built.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

So you talk about the way AI is being used at us and it's making work more productive in a lot of ways. That seems to me like it might be marginalizing people at the lower skill level. Is it going to displace them? I think that's the big fear.

Vilas Dhar, Patrick J. McGovern Foundation President:

I think there are a few assumptions here that are worth taking head on. The first is the question of whether AI is actually making us more productive. I think the jury's still out.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

That's interesting.

Vilas Dhar, Patrick J. McGovern Foundation President:

We think it makes us productive. There's a lot of anecdotal evidence about it, but productivity is measured in different ways. On one side, there's the classical rational view of productivity, which is measure the number of people hours and compare it to the productivity of outputs. And in industrial and manufacturing sectors, I think we're seeing significant evidence of that. But what about in white collar functions? What about in legal services? What about in legal aid services? Do we really know that these tools are actually making our lawyers more productive in delivering services? Well, as I said, the jury's still out.

We don't yet have that evidence, and I trust our economists and our Labor Bureau statisticians to give us an answer, but let's assume that's the case. Let's actually pull it apart though. What does it mean for a worker to be more productive? There's a positive conception of that, which I very much hope is the reality. Which is that this really isn't about job displacement, it's about task displacement. What I mean by that is the idea that AI will help us automate certain things that people do, and hopefully those will be the kinds of things that people least want to do.

What Jamie Merisotis calls in his book on Human Work, the dirty, unsafe, dangerous jobs. Well, that's great. I would love to be in a role where the things that I don't like to do all day long, I can hand off to a machine and implicitly then get back a bunch of time to do things that I consider to be productive. Well, that's a positive frame of it. Let's also acknowledge the negative frame of it. The productivity essentially says, "We'll take everything that a human does that a machine can do better, take it off their plate and begin to cut the number of humans in our workforce because we just don't need as many of them."

Unfortunately, the latter definition is often what people are talking about when they talk about productivity, and to me, that doesn't give us a pathway to a more robust workforce or a more robust economic future because I think if one of our great assets will be human ingenuity, creativity and participation, then all we're really doing is minimizing that in order to make sure that the things we know how to do today we do more efficiently.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

That's really an interesting point because that is the task part of it. Taking away some of the mundane or dangerous jobs and tasks would free up that creativity. But I also think... I'm going to use ChatGPT as an example. I know plenty of writers who have put stuff into ChatGPT so they can get a brief summary of something, but then they go back and look at it and they have to rewrite it anyway. But it took away that mundane part of putting it in and then they could use their creativity. So for knowledge workers and for people who have critical thinking, it feels like this does free up some of the space.

Vilas Dhar, Patrick J. McGovern Foundation President:

We learned this in the early days Ramona, and the way you frame that is exactly right. We always have a first order response to new technologies and disruptions, and I think about many of the teachers that I've been working with recently and how they share how they thought about ChatGPT in the classroom. We remember the early days, that spring of 2023, where we saw teachers really trying to struggle with the idea that their students were just using ChatGPT to do their homework, and we saw some absurd policy responses. We saw the New York City school district try to ban ChatGPT.

They very quickly realized that you can't keep a bunch of resourceful 13 year olds away from the tools that'll help them get better grades. But you know what happened that was really interesting there was the first round of it was this idea that students were going to ChatGPT to try to answer the questions on their homework. Well, very quickly, I think we all realized that ChatGPT wasn't particularly great at that and teachers could figure out when it was happening. But we also began to see this movement that we helped cultivate around saying, "Actually it's the wrong insertion point of ChatGPT into the pedagogical process."

Instead of students using it to answer their homework, what if they used it to co-read materials to say, "I need to do a book report. Read this book with me instead of writing the book report for me, ask me questions about it, that test whether I understand the book or not. When I answered, evaluate whether my answers are getting to the points that most people care about and if not, teach me how to do better." It moved an AI system from being something that responded to your own query, to something that you use with creativity to handle your task in a way that made you better.

And again, while that might sound hopelessly naive, we're seeing examples just like it across sectors. We're seeing mechanics using AI-based augmented reality systems to look at complex engines and not say, "Fix the problem." But rather say, "I have a hypothesis about what might be wrong. Tell me what tests I should do." That helps rocket scientists design better engines by saying not, "Give me the best possible version, but I have a theory. Try it out, simulate it, model it, and tell me what the problems might be." All of these places where AI becomes not just a replacement but a supplement that humans do what they do best.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

I think too that, you brought it up already, the negative reception to AI is that it's just going to destroy us. The Terminator example that you used. But what we've seen throughout history, I believe, is that technology also creates jobs that we never would've expected and that we may not even been able to anticipate. I'm looking at my iPhone here. All the people that it takes to make the iPhone are all the people that are creating the apps for it. These are jobs. So I think the idea that tech can create jobs as well is one that people are not looking at quite as robustly right now.

Vilas Dhar, Patrick J. McGovern Foundation President:

That's right. It's a much more difficult version of an emotional story. Because fear, as we will know, and we need to look no further than our current political landscape to understand that fear is the deeply resonant thing that'll command headlines. But in your example, what I find particularly compelling is less the manufacturing of the iPhone. We know and have a sense that that can actually be quite automated, but this incredible flourishing of creativity that happened when people could create their own apps.

On the Android system, on the iPhone system, whichever system it was, the idea that within a few years we could see things as complex as taking your print newspaper, making it available to you 24/7 on your phone as Angry Birds. I mean, what kind of human scope of imagination necessary to come up with both

of those things and how wonderful to live in a world where that happens? To me, I think about an AI enabled future, not as one that makes us more boring or replaces us from the things we do, but hopefully as one that gives us enough economic benefits that people have more freedom to take their leisure time and say, "What else could I make this system do?"

To come up with new expansions of human capacity layered on top of what AI lets us do. The idea that we might be able to do things like explore new mathematical proofs. I'm a huge nerd, Ramona. I love this, and I don't know if you followed, but recently there have been stories of 14, 15-year-old, 16-year-old students coming up with proofs to 100-year-old math problems because they're able to use these AI systems to discuss and talk about their hypotheses and their assumptions and to work through them. To think that we could expand the boundaries of human knowledge in abstract math and physics and sciences, but also in painting, in music, in culture.

Well, AI, we could just very quickly move from trying to figure out if it's a friend or a foe, to treating it like the tool that it should be. Something that we learn how to use and that by using makes us more capable.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

I love the example too of it in healthcare, the implications there or for a community-based organization, how could that help expand their capacity for compassion and for help for humanity?

Vilas Dhar, Patrick J. McGovern Foundation President:

Absolutely, and I'll give you an example of this. We've seen organizations that do two different things but that are connected through a common thread. One, an organization that's working in rural India and has been for 20 years to help new mothers in the most rural villages get access to maternal healthcare. They send community health workers out as far as a car will go onto a bicycle as far as that will go, and then walking out to these villages to support them. They've done this for 20 years without the benefit really of technology aids, but they've collected a lot of data.

In just a few months after having an AI capacity that enabled them to look at those 20 years of data. They were able to say, "We consistently see mothers who present with the same kinds of challenges. I wonder if there are patterns." And they use population level AI metrics and analysis to discover that there were entire clusters of villages that because of their cultural practices and their traditions, mothers were constantly presenting with low infant birth weight. And that single data insight led them to go back to explore what the underlying practices were and to figure out a solution which was essentially providing nutritional supplements.

And within a few months after the discovery, they found that that particular medical challenge had been resolved. This idea that you can take wisdom and empathy and compassion in this 20 years of work at the front lines, couple it with AI and begin to come up with systemic solutions that change the quality of life for millions of people. On the other side, very quickly, a challenge that's faced by African-American mothers or Black mothers here in the United States, that they know that they get disparate medical treatment depending on what health systems they go to.

And using data-driven approaches to allow them to report their own experiences. And allow somebody who's a new mother to use large language models and analytic platforms to simply say, "Hey, I'm considering going to this set of providers. Does the system have a recommendation for me of where I might get the best care?" Again, the system itself is rarely the solution, but it often gives us a direction to understand what is happening in the system and where we should go for our best advantage.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

So here we are, not quite two years into the ubiquitous ChatGPT conversation part of our cultural conversation now. Where do you think we're going in the short-term future?

Vilas Dhar, Patrick J. McGovern Foundation President:

I'll give you a sense of where I think we're going and then I'll tell you where I think we should be going and there'll be some overlap there, but you might see not much. I think where we're going this short term is a very necessary expression of the anger, the rage, the impatience, the frustration that people feel with what's happened over the last 20 years of technology. The sense that year after year we're losing more and more agency, and the necessary response to that will be to attack big tech. I think we're going to see our policy regulators in the fall legislative season putting forward plenty of bills that talk about this and global policy regulators that are really trying to figure out how to respond to this challenge.

I think we'll continue to have discussions about risk and safety, about whether these systems are representative, about whether they are biased. And these are critical conversations to have that require both technological solutions and human ones. And I think we'll keep talking about LLMs as if they are the extent of AI. I think we will continue to have technologists come out. Some of the most prominent and famous ones that I'm sure you know them. Coming out and telling us how LLMs will save the world for all of us, but here's where I think we should be going.

The first is to acknowledge that AI is a field that has so much amazing potential beyond large language models. From restructuring supply chains to create more equity for producers, to changing the way we think about energy production and having meaningful impacts on climate. There is so much work to be done that requires us to step out of the frame of what does ChatGPT do and instead ask, "How do we leverage the incredible opportunity of AI for all of those areas of human enterprise and expertise?" The second is I think we need to move from a frame of thinking about risk and safety to thinking about public investment and public ownership in AI.

It strikes me that it's quite logical that if we only let a few companies have access to the most powerful tools, then we should really be worried about why they're doing what they're doing. But what if we could take that access and make it possible for those who are qualified across American society, across the world to come in and build tools for their communities? That could be great. And the third is I think we really need to understand that this is, as much as we've talked about technology in this conversation, Ramona, not really a conversation about AI.

It's a moment in time where we can actually use it to force a bigger conversation, about equality and equity, about how we distribute economic benefits, about the fact that if we think somebody is going to be displaced, what's the responsibility of the person who displaced them? Note that I didn't say the machine that displaced them, but the person who made a choice to bring in a machine that displaced that worker. And how do we think about creating a new social compact so that every person feels dignified and participatory in the decisions we're making about our AI future? If we were to start having those conversations, I'd be so hopeful about our future.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

I would be too. Thank you, Vilas.

Vilas Dhar, Patrick J. McGovern Foundation President:

Thank you, Ramona. This has been a joy.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

Same. I've been speaking with Vilas Dhar, President of the Patrick J. McGovern Foundation. I'm Ramona Schindelheim Editor-in-Chief of WorkingNation. Thank you for listening.