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,

Entry-level jobs, potentially requiring years of work Experience is just one conundrum facing young people trying to launch their careers, but there are some organizations helping to bridge that gap, including Education at Work, a national nonprofit connecting top employers with college students nationwide. Earlier this month at South by Southwest EDU, I spoke with Education at Work's President Jane Swift about the organization's mission and how it benefits both employers by filling critical positions and students by giving them experience in the workplace. Swift, a former governor of Massachusetts passionately believes in the power of education to transform lives. She starts off by explaining to me how Education at Work partners with companies essentially becoming a talent contractor to them.

Jane Swift, Education at Work President:

So we are the employer of record and they will identify a workforce gap. They often are well-disposed to understanding that getting students into their workplace early is a great early career talent strategy, but effectively they contract with us the way they do with other outsourced organizations. The difference is we're using college students. And so we are given a certain number of full-time positions that we're required to fill. We are given the hours that they need us and the schedule at which they want us to cover those hours. The real magic happens because we are one of the few, maybe the only provider who is doing this at scale with college students in a part-time role. So most of the folks our students are replacing or competing against or colleagues with doing the same role into it or another organization are doing it in a part-time way where their colleagues will be doing it in a full-time.

Our students, and if you've had college students, you'll understand this, actually prefer the times that many FTE, normal working adults do not want to work. And so we'll work on weekends, we will work evenings, and the definition of evenings is even different for our students than it is, but that also allows us to schedule them in hours that don't conflict with their academic responsibilities. And that's really, really important for impact because many students who work 20 or more hours a week end up with poor outcomes in academics. That is not true for our students. Our students have outcomes that are the same as their peers who don't have to work 20 hours a week and better than their peers working in different settings for that much time.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

The definition that most people have of a college student is that, 20 something, early 20s just out of high school. But reality, I think it's like one in five college students as a parent. So they have other responsibilities, financial and time. Are you working with those students?

Jane Swift, Education at Work President:

So we have some of those students, but really, the great majority of our students are traditional college students who lack work experience. And so if you think about it, if you understand guild, we are almost the inverse of guild. So guild is taking workers who have work experience but need some academics in order to further their career. We're taking students who are getting the academics, but they don't have enough work experience, technical skills or durable soft skills, whatever word you prefer, to get that good first job. And so we're really focused on helping young adults.

You probably have seen all these statistics, but Georgetown released statistics that less than half of young adults make more than $35,000 a year. That is not a wage that is going to put you on a path to social and economic mobility. A lot of college students graduate and make less than $40,000 or $45,000 a year. That does not merit the investment you've made in your education. So our goal are to take those college students who need work experience and the upskilling and technical credentials we can include and embed into that work to get a good first professional job.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

How does this program work? Are you working with specific universities, colleges, and specific companies to bring these two together? So explain the whole process.

Jane Swift, Education at Work President:

The biggest key to all of this is to find employers who have workforce openings and who know they need to have a bigger pipeline of future workers and they have a need now. Our biggest challenge with employers is many of them fall into thinking in stereotypical ways about young adults. And we have super ambitious, hardworking students and that I think is a surprise to them. We also have 12 years of experience with this sophisticated workforce management system. So we actually have demonstrated outcomes and results. We can show them that yes, you can use college students in a part-time role to fill a job, you're already struggling to fill with a full-time worker.

And having that data is really why we think we're growing so fast right now because folks are like, "Whoa. Your students perform better than seven other outsourced providers who are using the traditional model." The answer is yes, because they're there for a very specific purpose and because our model has been perfected over time. So we prefer to place students where we have a formal relationship with a college or university, but we don't limit ourselves to just working with those students. But these are students who are probably your most at-risk population. 80% students of color, 50% on Pell Grant, 50% first gen. Those things all make navigating to a paid work or internship opportunity and a good job, much harder than it is for people and students who don't have the same profile. But it also means that we have to be cognizant of how many burdens they have and how many challenges they have.

So many of our students are food insecure. Some of our students are meeting their full expected family contribution for their education. And so the value of being affiliated with a campus is multi-fold. First of all, we often either get space from the college, which helps make our finances work as a nonprofit donated, or at least we're in very close proximity because expecting students to travel far distances to get to this job is just not a reality that works out all that often. Secondly, we can work with and career services are understaffed and have a lot of challenges. We see ourselves as a partner to them. And so we work together to promote what types of students may be interested in our work. A great thing happened a couple of weeks ago where we were mentioned on a parent page and another student's Facebook have these parent pages for colleges, if you know, you know. I'm not saying I endorse them.

But this young woman came to us and ASU is an example. We have both our physical site that's within three quarters of a mile of campus, and then we have a site in the student center that's open where we do a lot of recruiting, a lot of promoting of our opportunities. And this young woman came up to us, said, "My mom told me to come find you." I was like, yes, we're getting to the moms. But it really does help. We have so much information out there that getting the information to students, but that's one of our special sauce. And we can help employers with that. And then if we have students who are struggling, we are not a mental health provider, we try to always have food availability, but if somebody is really at risk of, some kind of life event, we have these tight ties with the administration where you

can get eyes on students and get them the help they need that they may not, because a lot of the universities we work with are really big and some of these students just may not know how to navigate.

I always think about my work study experience where I worked first in the cafeteria, but then found myself to religion and philosophy. And it was Gay Weidlich who was probably the single adult who saw me, had eyes on me more than a professor, more than anybody else. So she was the person who would say to me, "It's going to snow this weekend. Do not take your car into the city." Or, "I can't believe you don't have a jacket on today." Those are the light things. But as my children who've all finished their undergrad degree and one's finishing their master's would not fall into the at-risk bucket of students we serve. But their father died when all three of them were undergrads. And I became painfully and acutely aware of the difficulty in finding supports that were beyond the traditional things when life happens, again, it's not us providing that, but by having these close relationships with our partner colleges and universities, we are able to get the support to a student that they need.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

I think that's very important because in a lot of the work that we have covered at WorkingNation, I've seen, I use the term access to knowledge or access to, it's opportunity, but it's also knowledge. There's a lot of people who don't know how to find a career path. And once they may have stumbled into college, and I put myself in that category as someone who said, oh, I need to go to college, but I had no clue what it was going to go to and come from a lower middle-class family and I needed that support and it wasn't always there. So to be able to give people that support, to put them on the pathway to economic mobility, that support system is very, very crucial.

Jane Swift, Education at Work President:

And we're still trying to figure out how to do it best at scale. Because if you have a great supervisor who's very engaged with you, you could get one set. So we've actually been talking about how we can better use technology and upskilling, but also in helping students to build networks that will continue to give them the advice. So if I'm not hanging out in the cafeteria or one of the other executives isn't on the day before your big interview, who's the person who's going to help you figure out what to wear? How many calls have I gotten from my daughters?

It's a Zoom interview, do I still have to dress up? Yes, and look in the camera, don't look at the person. But just all those little things. And because I came from that world, I was Pell Grant, I was a lower middle class family at a very wealthy institution. I understand that little incremental advantages over a lifetime that my daughters have had as they're entering the professional world. And it is just really powerful if you have a place that both provides you wages, we provide tuition assistance, so we bring down a little bit of the burden of paying for school and then experience, skills. Then sine qua non,

Jane Swift, Education at Work President:

I took Latin, but that thing, but for you would be successful.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

I think that's what a lot of people, they experience it, but they don't know what to do about it. So I think that's very important. And then back to that idea of getting the experience that those young people may not have had jobs and they may not have been in professional roles. So what kind of industries are you

working with right now? Where do you see the big need or where you're having people come to you and say, we need somebody?

Jane Swift, Education at Work President:

So a lot of financial services, back office work. We're having conversations with, and previously before I was there, I worked with the hospitality industry as somebody who's on a flight all the time, the airline should be using us. Our students could solve problems a lot faster. We can document that our students are quicker to solve problems. But if you think about that, so think about Intuit and taxes or a Hilton on hospitality. One of my daughters who's getting her MSW said to me the other day, "I have been studying and studying the concept of cultural capital, but it wasn't until I had an experience where I knew something the professor was talking about that my peers just could not process." It was something about board meetings or boards of directors. And that provides a lot of advantages. So even if the job our students are doing is calling customer support, you're getting them exposed to a lot of the mechanics of adult life.

I ran another company, Middlebury, 15 years ago, and one of the students we recruited from Williams that was nearby didn't have a driver's license and had never been on a plane. Who could imagine? But if you went from one small town to a small town college and you were limited in your exposure means. And so one of my other colleagues helped him with his driving tests and practice and we walked him through like, this is how you get on a plane. I was actually a little bit thinking about it today. I haven't done South by before. I've done ASU. I'm like, oh, I don't know where everything is. I don't know where... And so you go through that, but you have the competencies to navigate. We're giving our students those competencies to navigate in addition to the thing they really come to us for, which is money and tuition support.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

You were formerly the governor of Massachusetts. What drew you to this kind of work?

Jane Swift, Education at Work President:

First of all, I've worked in education. So my own personal experience drove me to be in education. As a Pell Grants kid who saw the inequalities in educational preparation. Fortunately, back in the '80s, if you graduated from a good school, you actually ended up with a job that could give you mobility. But fast-forward 25, 6, 7 years, and my daughters are in school and it was COVID, but I really think COVID illustrated to a fine point, challenges that already existed in the system. But I had a daughter who graduated from Northwestern who had friends of her now fiance, I think they'll be at the wedding, who were majoring in STEM degrees and could not find internships.

And because they couldn't find an internship, partly because during COVID they were so much more limited, but partly because they were bartending for cash when it was time to get a job, their opportunities were so much more limited than the ones that my daughter had. You have to know the place I'm from, North Adams, Massachusetts. I actually ran into somebody who had moved away long ago and he's like, "Do you still have that chip on your shoulder?" I'm like, "You betcha. I still have that chip on my shoulder." But part of what I realized when I went to college is I was surrounded by a bunch of kids who are no smarter than the kids I had left home, but had been given so many more advantages. And the velocity of change, the challenges of COVID and of technology in this generation has just made it so hard for students to get that first job.

So I was starting to help my daughters with their job search, helping the now-fiance with his, if you remember the old Fabergé commercial, it doubles and then it doubles and it doubles. And pretty soon you're like, oh my gosh, I'm running 150 internship and job searches. But I would be looking at all of these postings for early career talent. And they expected students to have two years of relevant work experience and the system is not set up to provide you that. And so that's where we come in.

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That was my interview with Jane Swift, former governor of Massachusetts and current president of Education at Work. I spoke with her at South by Southwest EDU earlier this month. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, Editor-in-Chief of WorkingNation. Thanks for listening.