

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.

Today, we're talking about a simple business truth. Your employees are your most powerful, underutilized asset. When employees thrive, businesses soar. So how do you unleash all that talent and potential? Joining me to discuss is Dr. Angela Jackson, author of the New York Times bestseller, the Win-Win Workplace, and Co-founder of the Win-Win Workplace Summit. Angela, I'm so happy you could join me on the podcast.

Dr. Angela Jackson, Win-Win Workplace author and Win-Win Workplace Summit co-founder:

Ramona, thank you so much for having me.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

It was really great seeing you in Chicago just a couple of weeks ago at the Win-Win Workplace Summit. And what I walked away with that was all the people that you gathered together who saw the potential of putting the employees first and how important it is in business. So I just want to say kudos to that to start with. But I think that's an important place to start, centering around the employee and why that's so important.

Dr. Angela Jackson, Win-Win Workplace author and Win-Win Workplace Summit co-founder:

Ramona, thank you for saying that. And I was absolutely encouraged too. When you think about we had over 200 people the first day, 300 people the second day, and what combined you had CHROs, chief learning officers, CEOs, we had some politicians that were in the room. All of them were really centered on, how do we invest in people? Yes, because it's the right thing to do, but also because there's this business imperative to do it. And that's really why I founded the Summit, to really talk about the return on investment of investing in people. And seeing these business leaders come with their case studies, problems of practice and opportunities around talent, talking about their investing as a solution and what they saw as that ROI is a message that I hope that can really carry forward from the Summit.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

At a time when employers are complaining there is not enough talent out there, one of the things that I took away was, hey, look who you already have and figure out a way to invest in them. So what was some of the takeaways that you had from the Summit to that point?

Dr. Angela Jackson, Win-Win Workplace author and Win-Win Workplace Summit co-founder:

Well, when we started the Summit, we were really looking at the headwinds economically. As I've gone out and talked to CEOs most recently, many of them are really not thinking about hiring. They're thinking about how do they do more with their incumbent workforce. This bodes well for employees. And so what you had in that room at the Summit was a group of leaders who were thinking about, how do we invest in the talent that we have? How do we ensure what matters most to them in terms of their benefits, in terms of their work, that we're leveraging that and leveraging their expertise to actually drive the business? And you saw a lot of innovative ideas that came up.

But I think one central thing that I was taking away is that some of the best companies were using data as their real competitive advantage in their people data. And so not really talking bigger than just people

analytics, but really trying to understand their workforce, what they need today, what barriers they up against. And then as an employer, what can they do to help invest in these employees? So it's very different than a social contract that I wrote about when I wrote in my book, the Win-Win Workplace, about my grandfather at Chrysler. That social contract was, as long as you're doing your job, we will pay you, you will retire and you'll have a pension. We know that that's not true today. And so what was brought up for me, I'm taking away from this Summit, was what is the new social contract that we have that employers are thinking about and investing in their employees? So when we think about employees, they are looking to their employers to train them on the latest technology, to help them upskill for the future of work.

And so what we heard for some of the employers that were on stage at the Summit was they were talking about how they were using agentic AI, AI, and actually to upskill their employees, how they were actually tracking employee wellbeing and how that impacted the bottom line of the company. We had one woman, Kathleen Mattie, who was on stage, that talked about her work with Sanofi. She pulled up this beautiful dashboard, Ramona. And she goes, "We deeply know our employees. We know what they put on the applications when they came in, what skills they had. We know what skills that they've obtained over their tenure here. So if we're looking for a new role that's created or if we have a new technology rolling out, I can put those keywords in this dashboard and I get a list of employees who could be great candidates for this new role." And so those are the things that we're talking about of really using that data, understanding your employees, what talents they have, what skills they've obtained, and how you can leverage that to actually grow and build a business.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

That comes to the idea of how to develop that deep talent bench. So the idea that you are listening to them, they're telling you what they have, they're telling you what they need, and having some way to quantify that and then push it forward I think is very important. And I remember that particular presentation. And I thought, "Gee, I wish somebody had that when they were looking for talent at one of my jobs." They didn't think to come to me. Because sometimes employees don't know that they need to speak out loud and say it. So I guess that comes, again, with that engaging your employees as well.

Dr. Angela Jackson, Win-Win Workplace author and Win-Win Workplace Summit co-founder:

It does, and it goes from, when I write about the book, I talk about a win-win workplace versus the status quo, the zero-sum. The zero-sum was, well, if you didn't speak up and throw your hat in the ring for the position, you obviously didn't want it. What we're seeing now, with the advent of generative AI, is that every day workers are gaining skills on the job that they may not even know the names for, that almost have analogs to new jobs that are being created. And so it's really mutually beneficial when we think about how do we understand how that employee has changed, not because we want to just promote them, which we do and we want them to help grow, but actually the company needs that information. If your employee has gone through a couple of Coursera classes, maybe they've went back and got an associate's or a degree, it's actually imperative for the company to understand what value is already under their roof.

And so what we're seeing with some of the best companies, they're recognizing that. They're not waiting for someone to raise their hand. They're actively going out to tap people. They're developing what you said, and I write about in the book in chapter seven, this deep talent bench. So understanding as new opportunities present themselves, new business opportunities, who do we have on deck that could fill those opportunities? I'll give you a quick example. Tech Systems was one of the employers that presented, and they talked about how they were looking at non-traditional talent as a way to generate

new business. They do technology as a service for other companies. And they had some of their clients that were looking, in new locations, to fill tech roles. Well, what they were able to do was look within their companies, find gaps that they had in terms of talent, work with a nonprofit talent provider, Per Scholas, to actually skill this non-traditional talent for these open recs and jobs that their clients needed. And so some people may say, "Oh, that was great, and that was a nice thing that they worked for a nonprofit. Isn't that a great social program?" No. What that actually became was a new multimillion-dollar revenue line for Tech Systems. Partnering with that nonprofit, Pro Scholas, helped them develop a deep talent bench. So as their client said, "Go to Ohio," "Go to Detroit," "Go to Chicago," they had a deep talent bench ready to deploy actual employees for their customers. And so that's what we're talking about, this ROI, this return on investment of investing in people and thinking about non-traditional talent in new ways.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Another thing I came away with was, this may start at the top, but you need to get those frontline managers to be a part of this process. They need to understand the importance of engaging with their employees.

Dr. Angela Jackson, Win-Win Workplace author and Win-Win Workplace Summit co-founder:

That's exactly right. And this came through at the Summit. Someone's experience of a job is directly correlated by who manages them, more than what the CEO says, more than what the values say, more than what the benefits. How you experience a job is correlated to your manager, how they manage you, how they invest in you, how they mentor you. And in seeing that, what we saw with the set of companies that were at the Summit is that they were talking about how they were actually targeting their frontline managers, which I write in the book. I say moving frontline managers to frontline leaders. Now that we know how important they are to an employee's experience, whether they stay or whether they go, whether they grow or they stay stagnant, we think about the strategy we heard about, how do you invest in these managers? One, to understand how to be better people managers in addition to being great individual contributors or subject matter experts. Also thinking about with these frontline managers, how do we measure their performance and impact on actual people?

There's one case study I write in the book and we had a representative from the firm at the Summit, a global financial firm, they talked about they had managers, over 50,000 of them, in three tiers. Some of them were like A+, knocking it out of the box. The second tier was doing everything they needed to do. But then they had a third that were underperforming. And it was underperforming they saw a direct correlation to assets under management at their bank branches because of this underperformance. When they dug a bit deeper, what they found were that these managers hadn't been trained to actually manage their people. When you went to their direct reports, you'd ask about a net promoter score, would you recommend this manager to a colleague or this job to a colleague? The majority of the people were saying no.

They actually went in and did trainings for these managers on how to manage people. They were able to flip that. And what that mean by flipping it, they had more employees who wanted to stay, who actually more highly rated their managers. And actually the bottom line grew because the assets under management actually went up as an indicator.

So the things that we're talking about with the Win-Win Work Place Summit, and even in the book, these aren't fluffy, feel good, things you'd say. They have a direct correlation to the health of the business. So thinking about, when you're increasing assets under management, that's a big deal for a

bank, when dollars are tight. This is a differentiator between being a number one bank and being a number 10 bank. And so these are the case studies that we'd hope to bring to bear for just the general public.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

On my panel that I did, it was about how reporting out on that human capital is actually a competitive advantage, a competitive strategy. Rodney Bolden of Morton Stanley at work was on my panel. And one of the things that he brought up on stage, and then also just in some conversation off-stage with him, is going back to that frontline manager and the employee expectations. So the fact that some employees don't feel that their employers are telling them, I want to say, how to do their jobs or what their expectations are, seem to be a very important part of bringing that employee along and wanting them to stay.

Dr. Angela Jackson, Win-Win Workplace author and Win-Win Workplace Summit co-founder:

That's exactly it. And what we saw, and I just have to say, Ramona, that was one of my favorite panels. In addition to Rodney, you had someone from JP Morgan's Chase, Brody, who was with them. You had Marcus Felder from Blackstone. These are companies that live and die on their measurement and who are really thinking about frontline workers. And the cost associated with turnover for frontline workers is a key strategy to reducing that to actually driving better business outcomes. And so they're looking at the dollars and cents. And that's the new playbook, not accepting high turnover rates as a given, but really thinking about, what are small tweaks that we can do in terms of the strategy to help people stay longer and to actually be more engaged?

My takeaway from that panel was we need to understand why people are leaving even at the front lines. We need to think about even reducing that by 10 or 15%, how many millions of dollars the organization, most average organizations, can actually save, if you're a medium or large size business. And just really understanding, what are the levers that you can use to engage them? And so we're talking about how we onboard these managers and actually train them to be people managers. We're also talking about these companies do that they're regularly in contact with their people. They're not waiting for an exit interview, they're not waiting for the ninety-day probationary period. They're checking in on sometimes a monthly basis with a subset of the population to understand what makes you stay, what makes this the best-in-class place to work at. And they're using that information to dial up what works and to dial down or even replace and fix what's not working for these employees so that they're seeing these longer tenure rates, which is saving the company money.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

The Summit was in our hometown, Chicago, go Chicago, Chicago strong, as the mayor said at the conference. One of the things that I really loved was hearing from Skills for Chicagoland Future. They told the story of Discover, which created a call center on the south side of Chicago, which addressed the quality of life issue for some of those residents there who maybe some of them were driving, or taking the bus, two hours, so they were missing their taking their kids to school, or they were not being able to go to after-school programs with their kids. So the idea that, again, an employer walks into a community, sees what's needed, and then invests in that community and those employees, again, seem like a great strategy, because now you have those employees, as we talked about, that are thriving.

Dr. Angela Jackson, Win-Win Workplace author and Win-Win Workplace Summit co-founder:

That's exactly it. And I think that story, when you really unpack what Discover did by going into this area, they went in, really, with an economic development mindset. They had incentives from the city to do that, and it was a great program. What was unexpected for Discover was how profitable this call center would be, one of the top ones that they have literally in the country. And what they were able to see was that they had lower talent costs, they had a higher educated talent who was there, because people, to your point, Ramona, it meant the world to them to be able to work in a place where they could see their kids off from school, that they could actually walk to work or take public transportation. They also saw a lower turnover because, again, people living in their communities.

And this really landed on me when I was leaving downtown Chicago and headed to the airport. I left around 2:00. It took me an hour and a half to get to the airport, an hour and a half. And so, I had forgotten the many years since I've lived in Chicago as an adult, but I used to make that same trip and it would take me three hours of time. And at that time I was in my early twenties. I didn't have a family. I didn't have to come home and do homework with my child, et cetera. But when you think about that amount of commute time and what that cost parents in terms of the time away from home or how do they manage their work responsibility plus caregiving responsibilities. By putting that call center in that neighborhood, they were saving a lot of time and dollars and angst for those employees.

And the return that this company got by solving that, what would've normally been seen as someone's personal problem, was that they got a number one call center. They had a stickier retention rate in employees and higher loyalty, higher satisfaction. And they had a lower cost, because they went into an economically depressed area. So instead of paying the cost that you pay downtown in the loop of Chicago, they're paying a quarter of that by building the manufacturing there in Chatham on the south side of Chicago. So these are real tangible benefits that make this not just the nice thing to do, but actually make it the financially responsible and profitable thing to do in terms of a business on who you hire and the benefits and wraparound supports that you're providing them.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Showing other companies that this can be a good strategy, all these little pieces that you've talked about, not everyone's going to try it, not every business is going to try it, but if they start incorporating some of this in, there is a return on their investment. In your book, you have a chapter on how to measure the impact and ROI. So what would you say to business leaders on how to do that? What should they be looking at?

Dr. Angela Jackson, Win-Win Workplace author and Win-Win Workplace Summit co-founder:

Yeah, Ramona, when we're thinking about human capital, we always say that human capital is our most valuable resource. But when you look at reports and we talk about the KPIs that most businesses are measuring, or if we're talking about this even at a board level with directors, how often are we looking at our talent costs and our retention cost? How often are we looking at how much we're saving or losing when we're having turnover, and how we might go about strategically reducing those rates?

What we're saying to businesses is we need to elevate the conversation on human thriving and how our employees are doing. We need to think about what are those three to five KPIs that any business would know if they said they had a healthy workforce. If I came to you, Ramona, and I said, "WorkingNation, how are your employees doing?" What are the indicators you'd say, "We know they're doing well because of these three to five things"?

You need to be measuring those not once a year and we're targeting in performance reviews. What we saw with these Win-Win Workplace companies, they were doing it on a monthly basis. They were

checking in with a percentage of their employees, be it 5%, a certain group or department, regularly to get these insights to make sure that they had the finger on the pulse of the well-being of their employees, so that they were actually thinking about benefits and strategies that they could develop that could help break down some of those barriers that people have to work.

I'll give you an example. We are now in a five generation workplace. We've got young professionals who are caregiving for their children, but also for their families. They have very different needs than traditionally that we've seen in the workplace. So what are the benefits that we can create as an employer that actually tells an employee, we see that you have these responsibilities, these are the benefits we have in place to help you? These are the policies and procedures around flexibility that we're going to put into place so that you can actually take your mom to that doctor's appointment that she needs to go to or even yourself. These aren't nice to haves.

I have a colleague at the Harvard Chan school did a report and they said, employees who have a critical illness, that 32% of them have missed a doctor's appointment because they're afraid to tell their managers. This is what I call a zero-sum workplace. We can't afford to have people going in sick because of their live realities. We need to make sure that we have trained managers that really understand and create environments where people can show up and talk about those extra caregiving responsibilities. They can talk about the two-hour commute and maybe the bus isn't working this time, because all these issues are critical to someone's ability to show up and fully engage and work.

And so we can't pretend that they don't exist or we can't pretend that it's just the employee's responsibility, because what we saw with the research we did in the book, Ramona, these have real impacts on the bottom line. And we've seen with companies who've actually taking these on that they do have that higher retention rate, that they have more productive employees. They have more engaged employees. And that at the end of the day, that's helping these companies to actually thrive compared to their peers.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I want to throw in a stat there around the caregiving and people working. Next week on the podcast, I will have Paul Irving on, and we are talking about that caregiving issue. There's a new documentary that'll be streaming next week on PBS called Caregiving from Bradley Cooper, the actor, director. Paul Irving is a consulting producer on it. That number is 53 million to maybe, I think he said that there's an estimate it's going to go up to 100 million working adults in this country who also have caregiving responsibility. That's a lot of people out there who could use that extra care from their employers that understand it because we're all going to be in there. So I'm glad you brought that point up. It is a very, very important one in our workforce today.

Dr. Angela Jackson, Win-Win Workplace author and Win-Win Workplace Summit co-founder:

I really appreciate that. The biggest thing, Ramona, that we want to leave with listeners today is that, one is we need to more deeply understand what our employees are up against in getting to work. And I wrote about this years ago where I called it the social terms of work, but really understanding the factors around housing, the factors around transportation, around caregiving. Even today, when we talk about the economic headwinds, we read tariffs and that seems general. But really thinking about, what does that mean to mom and dad who needs to get junior a new pair of tennis shoes next week? These are top of mind for the employees who are coming in today. And so some of the best employers we see are really thinking actively about, one, how they acknowledge what these headwinds are. Two, think about, as an employer, what is their role, what can they do? But also where might they partner with community-based resources that can actually help to meet the needs?

What we've seen in our research is that this actually signals to employees that their employer cares about them. Why is that important? When you look at most statistics, you've got upwards of 60% of employees saying they don't feel that their employer cares about them. Well, if they don't feel that, what we have seen in our research is there is a lack of accountability on the other side. And that's where you see some of these phenomenon around quiet quitting. You see some of the phenomenon around people who are just the high turnover jobs. We really need to think about this new social contract and how we are making sure that the employees have what they need so they can come in and, again, fully engage and work.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Angela, thank you very much for joining me on the podcast. I hope everybody gets a chance to read the book, the Win-Win Workplace. And I, again, thank you very much for including me in that Summit. I learned a lot.

Dr. Angela Jackson, Win-Win Workplace author and Win-Win Workplace Summit co-founder:

Ramona, thank you so much. And we're going to encourage people later this month, we're putting all the videos up from the Summit, so your session will be up there. We're encouraging people to go there and listen. If they have questions, they can link in to me. And also go to the Future Forward Institute and they can find all of the research behind the Win-Win Workplace Summit and all of the videos and just great to have this conversation.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I will put that link in the page for the podcast, and thanks again.

Dr. Angela Jackson, Win-Win Workplace author and Win-Win Workplace Summit co-founder:

Thank you, Ramona.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I've been speaking with Dr. Angela Jackson, author of the Win-Win Workplace, co-founder with Jamei Blivin of the Win-Win Workplace Summit. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of WorkingNation. Thank you for listening.