



John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development

Transcript Episode 3: Todd Greene

Podcast Introduction (*music playing*): Welcome to *Work Trends RU*, presented by the Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. In this podcast, we speak with experts, policymakers, and thought leaders about issues affecting work, education, training, the economy, and well-being. Each episode of *Work Trends RU* provides insights into important topics like changes in the job market, economic challenges, and how artificial intelligence is shaping the future of work. Our guests share their thoughts and reflections on how public and private sectors can better address the needs of workers, job seekers, and employers. Join us as we discuss the evolving landscape of work and education on *Work Trends RU*. (*music ends*)

Carl Van Horn: Welcome to Work Trends RU. I'm Carl Van Horn, the director of the Heldrich Center for Workforce Development and a professor at Rutgers University. We are honored today to have with us Todd Greene, Vice President for Work, Education, and Labor Division and Executive Director of WorkRise at the Urban Institute. And also, I should mention, he's the chair of the Heldrich Center's National Advisory Board. Welcome to our program, Todd. Thanks for joining us.

Todd Greene: Thank you, Carl, it's great to be here. I just so admire the work that you and your team at Heldrich do. It's been an amazing journey and I'm honored to be a part of the board.

Carl Van Horn: Well, let's talk about what you do, Todd. I mean, you've been leading this important project at the Urban Institute, WorkRise, for several years now. And as I understand it, its purpose, which is broad and important, is to identify important ways to help people succeed in the labor market, promising or proven practices, and also launch some initiatives. So, I know it's hard to summarize because we all love what we do and all of our children, but give us a summary of what you think are the greatest accomplishments during your time there.

Todd Greene: Yeah, well, it is definitely hard to summarize. But I'll share a few key impacts that really stand out for me. So, as you mentioned, WorkRise has become a trusted national platform that really brings together employers and worker advocates and researchers and policymakers. These are groups that don't always sit at the same table. So, we're focused on tackling some of the toughest issues facing low wage workers. And we do that by identifying bold ideas and funding rigorous research and then translating and sharing that evidence in ways that can actually inform decisions on the ground. So, in just a few years, we funded over 50 projects. So, you can tell it's hard for me to settle on a few, but these projects help to answer real world questions like how to make jobs better in manufacturing and how to improve

job quality for immigrant owned small businesses or how to support workers in the South where protections are historically weaker. We've also made sure that worker voices are front and center in our work. And we're proud that WorkRise has emerged in this rare kind of a space, especially in today's climate, where broad and diverse group of stakeholders can really align around a shared goal of improving mobility for low wage workers.

Carl Van Horn: Can you give us a little more detail about some of those projects that, again, that you think have been most successful and had the greatest impact?

Todd Greene: Yeah, so we are definitely seeing action and that's the goal of WorkRise. We don't invest in research just for the sake of it. We support work that responds to the needs of the field and then it provides tools that people can actually use. So, one example I'll mention is in Northeast Ohio. WorkRise funded a magnet, it's a local manufacturing extension partner. We funded them to co-design a training program with employers. That work directly helped address a worker shortage and re-imagined what workforce training could look like, wraparound supports, employer-led design and all. And in Florida, we supported research on how criminal conviction bans limit access to occupational licenses. That work was shared with state lawmakers and is already informing new policy proposals to expand access and support second chance hiring. Then maybe the last one I'll mention is we helped support Workforce Almanac. It's a first of its kind, it's a comprehensive open-source map of US workforce training providers. It's being used by thousands of policymakers, funders, and employers to understand where workforce investments are happening and where the gaps are. So, yes, we are seeing movement and we're making sure our evidence gets into the right hands.

Carl Van Horn: So that's really interesting. I wasn't aware that you'd put that handbook together. Where did you gather that information?

Todd Greene: Yeah, this is a project that was out of Harvard. So, we're one of several supporters of that project. It's by the Harvard Project on Work.

Carl Van Horn: And so that's made publicly available through training agencies, educational institutions, and community organizations and the like?

Todd Greene: Definitely. One opportunity that WorkRise was particularly interested in helping to see that work, as I mentioned, this work is supported by a number of funders. But WorkRise was especially interested in how this work could be used by economic developers, workforce providers, and others who said that they were having challenges making connections around the work.

Now, one goal that we hope to see with this work, ultimately, is some opportunity to provide some assessment about how some of these workforce providers are actually performing, so that local policymakers, economic developers, and others can make more informed decisions, data informed decisions about where they see the most promising places for investment and maybe some of the other providers who might need additional support in order to ensure their outcomes can be strengthened.

Carl Van Horn: Yeah, I mean, this is a very important topic. It's been since around since dirt, I think. And yet it's really hard to tackle because there's so many thousands of credentials,

training providers. And as you pointed out, many cases more advertising than evidence, right? So, where's the evidence coming from? Is it promising or proven in your... the way you describe these projects.

Todd Greene: Yeah, I'd say that in some cases the evidence is building. So let me just chunk this up a little bit. So, we at WorkRise spend a lot of time engaging with stakeholders in the field who are asking important research questions. Important questions that they need to inform their work to craft stronger programs, to think about stronger policies. And it is, and Carl, this is no surprise to you, but invariably when we are presented with this as a novel question, like we'd love it if you could conduct research on issue X or Y, we often find, and I'd say maybe in 95 % of the cases, the evidence already exists, right? So, it just may be inaccessible to those sets of stakeholders who may not be so much interested in combing through an academic journal article that you or I would particularly enjoy doing. But how can we work to translate that in a way that a policymaker or a practitioner could really understand, can sink into it and get their hands around. In other cases, there really are novel questions and WorkRise does help to support the development of this evidence in order to kind of move the issue forward. And then maybe, finally, I'll mention that in cases where WorkRise is supporting novel evidence or there are novel research questions, that may be an area that WorkRise is not able to support financially, but we are helping to inform philanthropy and others who might be in a position to support the field in ways that action can be taken that is driven by the questions and the concerns of real-world people who are facing these problems and challenges in terms of how they're designing their programs and projects.

Carl Van Horn: Well, as you probably know, under the Workforce Opportunity Act, there is something called the Eligible Training Provider List. And we've worked with the New Jersey state government on that for many years, using data connecting training programs with labor market outcomes, earnings, and so on. And I was encouraged by a recent statement by the National Governors Association, a bipartisan organization that said, "we understand you're going to cut programs, but we want to make sure that you continue funding the state longitudinal data systems in this country", you know, bipartisan. So, I think that's encouraging because what that means is there's still going to be data to answer the questions that you just identified, not perhaps in every state, but in more states than is present now.

Todd Greene: Yeah, I cannot emphasize the importance of having credible and accessible data and the importance of being able to undertake research that can help to craft these policies and programs. I think it'd be fair to say that there are some concerns about data preservation, of the types of data that will allow us to disaggregate in ways that are important to understand how impacts are around particular populations and programs can be designed. So, I think that that's really important. I think the other powerful aspect, you mentioned longitudinal data, which I know you all have been doing a lot of work around in helping to really dig into outcomes, not only for New Jersey, but in other places. And of course, the power of this is to be able to aggregate various data sources to be able to tell a compelling story. And so, I think the power of AI and other places will only propel our capacity to do that. But underlying that, we still need to have data and data collection. And so more to come on that. And so, we'll see how that plays out in the current environment.

Carl Van Horn: Of course the other missing link, which I assume you've been thinking about and perhaps you have some projects launched in this way, is to get that information to people

where they live, where you know the sources that they go to whether it's community-based organizations or faith-based organizations, because not everybody is trolling the internet at eligible training providers reports from state government, right?

Todd Greene: Absolutely. And understanding who controls the lever for that particular policy or the practice and really digging down into understanding who is going to be the change agent and to be able to respond to them. So, WorkRise spends a fair amount of time thinking about what... who is the change maker and then how do we present that evidence, that research, and how do we get it into the hands of that change maker? Not every mayor, so we work a lot with mayors, but most mayors aren't interested in reading a 30-page paper. So, how do we distill that information and then also how can we work through intermediary organizations, whether it's the legal cities or US Conference of Mayors or other associations so that we can make sure that this information is not only disseminated, which I don't often like that word, but really to create an opportunity for more engagement around this. I think a successful WorkRise is when, in this example around mayors, is when mayors themselves have an opportunity to discuss among themselves what this research means for their particular context and to be able to lean into it to create and inform policies.

Carl Van Horn: Are there particular cities or counties where you would want to give a shout out to that you think have been embracing this and making good progress?

Todd Greene: Yeah, I'll just say that we've had some promising impacts along a couple of dimensions in a local standpoint. So, one example I'll mention is in Minneapolis. There we supported a project that was led by Workplace Justice Lab also with Rutgers, another part of Rutgers, in partnership with the city and the Main Street Alliance. The project worked directly with immigrant and minority-owned small businesses to test whether offering hands-on HR and payroll help could improve compliance, but also improve job quality. The answer so far is yes. It's more effective than just giving a "handbook". And as a result, the city is looking at new ways to expand those services. And then maybe another skills-first hiring project that we supported with SHRM. It worked with helping small businesses in Georgia rethink how they assess credentials, moving away from some of these degree requirements and toward the actual skills themselves. Now, I know that that isn't new, but to be able to bring that to scale is something that is important and to get it in the hands and allow these entities to actually engage in this. Now, this work is already influencing how some of those businesses hire retain talent.

And then maybe the last example I'll give is in the temporary staffing space. We know that's been a challenge since, as you mentioned, since dirt around how these agencies are really helping to... their placement in the ecosystem and how they're supporting workers. So, our research there, the research that we supported in Houston and in Nashville, it revealed clear patterns of racial and gender bias in job placement. Now that evidence is now informing local enforcement strategies and pushing for policy changes, we hope nationally, to improve how the temporary agency industry, how it operates. Now these are real outcomes and they're driven by partnerships between researchers, but also with communities and decision makers.

Carl Van Horn: So, you used the two most popular letters in the alphabet, AI, a little bit ago. So, how are you engaging with that new opportunity/challenge?

Todd Greene: Yeah, so, of course, AI is at the top of everyone's list. I can't go to a conference or a meeting without it being discussed. And there are lot of players in this space. And, of course, the field is emerging very quickly. So, a couple of the core issues include: What is the impact on AI on the low wage workforce? How is that going to work together? And what kinds of outcomes do we expect for these workers? But I think the flip side of that is what opportunities exist for low wage workers as a result of AI? So, what WorkRise is doing is that we are creating an expanded bibliography, so to speak, and helping to harmonize some of emerging information that is coming out around the impacts and to maybe create a couple of policy briefs that can help to explain where stakeholders in the field should be looking, what questions they could be asking or should be asking, and hoping to create a resource on our website to pull that together. Now, we're really fortunate that we're very connected to a couple of big thinkers in this space. David Autor, a professor at MIT, is a member of our workforce leadership board. And by the way, they hope to really inform us about helping us set our agenda and where WorkRise should be moving and what kinds of research investments we should be making. And, so, that is David Autor and Michael Strain and many others are thinking through this. So, we're working very closely with our leadership board in helping to think about this very powerful tool that I think can really create opportunities from the low wage workforce.

Carl Van Horn: Where do you think WorkRise is headed over the next few years? Give us a little preview, a little insight into the future.

Todd Greene: We definitely have a strong line of projects that they're wrapping up soon and I'm really excited about several of them. So, one is a new report on fair work week laws. It examines how predictable scheduling, policies, and how they're actually playing out for workers in the retail industry and the hospitality industry and also in food service. And we're looking at cities like, this project is looking at cities like Chicago and New York and Seattle. And these are the kinds of laws that sound great in theory, but we're digging into how they actually function in practice. So, this is an area where I think there's a lot of potential opportunity for low wage workers in terms of their mobility strategies.

Now, we also have some new data-rich reports on young workers in manufacturing. This is really timely right now given the national investments in that sector. It looks at trends and training pathways and job quality issues and opportunities for younger workers who are trying to break into the field.

And then maybe the final thing I'll mention is there's also a short policy brief that we're coming out with soon on how higher education can better support apprenticeship programs. Kind of a fresh angle on the earn and learn model that's getting more attention.

And, of course, we're expecting many other grantee publications in the next few months that will expand our evidence base and bring forward new ideas for transforming the labor market. But I'll just also end by saying later this year, fingers crossed, we will be launching a new WorkRise website that is really more user-friendly, that will be aggregating information in a way that is designed around users and their needs to present research in new exciting ways, but really allows them to take action. And as WorkRise moves forward into its next chapter, we'll continue to support this novel research in the field and we're also leaning a lot more into the translation space. We're also looking at really strengthening our partnerships with national

organizations to ensure that we are helping to work in tandem with them about the most compelling questions that they have.

And then finally, later this year, WorkRise will launch kind of a national survey. It may not be a nationally representative rigorous survey, but it'll be closer to a poll to really understand, to invite the field to share with us where they have compelling questions. And we're looking to do that not only to inform our own work, in our agenda at WorkRise, but also to share with philanthropy and others about where potential further research investments could or should be made where they're likely to have the most of the biggest impact.

Carl Van Horn: I think that last point is very exciting because the field is not surprisingly fractured in many different ways: levels of government, types of organizations, universities, nonprofits. And so, it's hard to keep up with the field. If you're a leader of a community organization or a state government agency or whatever, you'd have to do the Federal Reserve Bank, which of course we know about a lot... You'd have to spend 30 % of your day just trying to keep up, right? So, I applaud that, a way to begin to bring that together in a way, because essentially there, of course, there's elements of competition, but there's probably more points of complementarity and agreement about the need to address these issues and to have a place to go to, because it is indeed a very complex field and covers a huge part of the education, labor, community development landscape, right?

Todd Greene: Yeah, and for sure. You know, Carl, you brought up something that I'll just want to underscore, or maybe add to would be a better way of phrasing it. And that has to do with rigorous research and rigorous evidence. I worry in the current moment that information is being presented as evidence and it really may not be, at least in the way our training lets us know it's important that we create and continue to press on and support those types of institutions who are doing the kind of evidence-building that is really going to be additive to the field. And in order to do that, then there needs to be standards and there needs to be opportunities for data access. There needs to be opportunities for others to inspect the work. And I know that it may be strange that I have to name these things because that's just one of those things that we've always expected, but as I sit here today, I do - I feel compelled to actually name that.

Carl Van Horn: I think the other issue, which isn't necessarily in your lane, but it's one that I always worry about, is there's a lot more attention to new ideas than there is the attention to how to actually implement those ideas, right? The management, the grind of actually putting a program in place. And there's an example where you need an evaluation to show here's a bunch of programs that have the same label, but in fact, as they played out from one jurisdiction to the next were quite different, mainly, probably, because the people and organizations trying to put them in place didn't do a very good job. And that is, you know, I see that, for example, in a lot of the earn and learn programs. Again, great idea, but not easy to implement. Right? And there's just been, I think, over a long period of time, a degradation of the art and science of management.

Todd Greene Yeah.

Carl Van Horn: And we need to put more attention to that because our research can give us evidence-based results in places where it works under controlled circumstances. But then you go beyond that, how are you going to actually make this happen? And that's much harder.

Todd Greene: Yeah, and I think the point that I, just add to there, is that it is insufficient for us to just create the evidence. It is our jobs are really, and I think a highlight of how the field is evolving, is that we have to be more persuasive and we have to look for new ways to present information so that it can reach the people who take the action. Now, in some cases, they're not going to take the action for various reasons, but I do think that we, as a field, have to work harder in making sure that this evidence is presented in a way that is easy for these types of actors to move the information forward, for them to design their programs and not waste money. So, I mean, I think that's just an important aspect that needs to be named. I mean, I know your work and my work for the past decades. We know that there are lots of investments that are made in programs that we already know are not the best investments. But I do think that in this unique time of especially scarce resources that it's even more important for us to make the right types of investments where the evidence points to real success and real opportunities for impact.

Carl Van Horn: Well, that's a great way to close the conversation on WorkRise. Of course, to remind our listeners, we'll put links to many of the things you mentioned today so they can follow up. I do want to end our conversation, which is just really scratches the surface, but it was, I think, very helpful to people - have a little fun, which is really basically everybody has a first job, right? And most people remember that either fondly or not. And so I'd love to hear you tell us what your first job was as a paid job and what you learned from that and how that might be important to you either as a positive or a negative experience today.

Todd Greene: Yeah. Well, I laugh about this because I'm still trying to figure out if it was positive or negative. I'm going to say that it's positive. So, my first paid job was working with my Aunt Judy at a swap meet in Miami on Saturdays. And for those listeners who may not be familiar with the swap meet, that may be a bit of a dated term, it's a sort of an open-air market where vendors set up booths or tables to sell all kinds of stuff. I'll just say "stuff", like clothes to electronics, homemade goods. And it's bustling and it's vibrant. And in Miami's heat, it's also a grueling place to work. My aunt worked as a steward on Amtrak and on her layovers in New York. buy all sorts of interesting things, home items and accessories, and we sell them together at these swap meets on weekends. So, there are many lessons I kind of learned during that time that still stick with me today.

So, the first one is be on time. At the swap meet, the best locations went to the earliest risers. We were very much focused on that. So, Saturday morning started early. So, there was no cartoon watching for me as a kid at that point.

And then I learned how to engage customers, meeting people where they are. I mean, at the swap meet, you're going to meet all kinds of people. people of all nationalities and people who speak different languages, but just being able to connect to these individuals across differences, I think that's just a part of work that, you know, who thinks about that, but that's a core component when we think about work now. So, and even though it was just the two of us, teamwork was everything. So, we had to be in sync, just the two of us there, setting up and managing multiple customers, making sure the booth was always staffed. And I learned how to

pitch in to take initiatives and to really share responsibilities. But there were some deeper lessons that I learned, too, really about fairness and dignity at work. Now, my aunt didn't just pay me an hourly wage. She also shared a portion of the day's profits with me. So, she saw me as a partner in her success and that made me feel valued as a worker, and, you know, clearly that is something that is an important theme in today's work that we should be pursuing. She just made sure that I was treated with care, checking on how I was doing, and making sure I had water breaks, and in heat. So that's another area that WorkRise is focused on is that workers are experiencing heat. So, that was an early lesson that I learned from my aunt about working in the heat and the need for hydration. But she also asked my opinion on how the booth should be run and teaching me new skills along the way. And as my skills grew and as I was able to do more, she paid me more. Right?

So, these are all the hallmarks of a good job and they shaped my understanding of what sheer prosperity means and what a workplace with dignity could look like, even as a lower wage worker. So, I'm deeply grateful to my Aunt Judy for giving me that opportunity and for modeling what respect and work looks like in action.

Carl Van Horn: That sounds like a model employer for sure. Thanks so much for sharing that story with us, Todd. And look forward to see you and we'll let our listeners learn more about WorkRise and you. And thanks so much for joining us today.

Todd Greene: Always a pleasure to talk to you, Carl.

Podcast Close (*music playing*): Thank you for joining us on today's episode of *Work Trends RU*, where we explore the issues affecting the future of work, education, and how the workforce can be better supported by both the public and private sectors. Tune in next time as we continue our conversations on the evolving landscape of work and education. (*music ends*)