



John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development

Transcript Episode 4: Jane Oates

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*, the podcast sponsored by the Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University. I'm Carl Van Horn. I'm the director of the Heldrich Center for Workforce Development and a professor at Rutgers.

Today, we're very fortunate to be joined by Jane Oates, who is the Senior Policy Advisor at WorkingNation. Jane's had a fabulous career as an advisor to the US Senate, Senator Ed Kennedy, Assistant Secretary of the United States Department of Labor, head of the Higher Education Agency in New Jersey, and many other things. So, we're very fortunate to have Jane join us today.

Jane, good to see you again. We've known each other a long time. And of course, I admire your work and your career. But today we want to talk about currently what you've been working on for several years, which is WorkingNation as the Senior Policy Advisor there. And, it's really a very interesting project and multi-pronged effort to publicize things that work and things people should pay attention to, which I don't think anybody was really doing. I mean, it really was an important thing. But I want you to talk about that really. What is it that you think has been some of the big takeaways and accomplishments during your time leading that organization along with your colleagues?

Jane Oates: Well, you know, first I have to give right back at you, Carl. One of my best experiences in New Jersey was being, becoming friends with you and I'm so glad we've been able to maintain that friendship. You were so helpful to me when Governor Corzine was there and I came in. I was an outsider and you welcoming me made my job so much easier. So, thank you. And that's, that's heartfelt.

I will answer your question about Working Nation. You know, when I decided to join WorkingNation, I met the CEO and founder, the philanthropist Art Bilger, who literally had this

idea that because of four things coming together, you know, globalization, technology, a disconnected education system, and basically people staying in the workforce longer, these four things coming together were gonna create real problems, challenges, and opportunities, but really more challenges for the American workforce. And he wanted to tell stories to mitigate the risk of those factors being really destructive. He had a background in, you know, philanthropy, but a background in TV and things like this. He knew the power of media. So, for me, you know, my joining him, he already had incredible talent that could do the production. What he didn't have was somebody who understood the workforce system, the education system. So, it was compelling for me because, Carl, you know this, I mean, you and I both love the public workforce system. We both love education starting with K-12, but community colleges, four-year research universities. We love it all, right? And the bottom line is they do, and they have done, an abysmally poor job of telling their stories. And the only time they really come up to talk about what they're doing is when they're playing, you know, defense, when somebody has said something negative about them. So, this idea of storytelling about the positives that this world was doing was just a no-brainer for me. I thought this is great; I want to get involved in it. And really eight years later, it has been one great storytelling experience after another.

We started with yours, Carl. You were one of the first ones, what your project on helping people over 50 come back into the workforce. That was a terrific project that the Heldrich Center did. Remember, we did not only a video about Joe, who I still am in touch with, but also a live event there at the Heldrich Center, which was just spectacular. Our first live event that then went on to be aired on PBS in New York and New Jersey. It was a huge success. That was back in, it must've been 2018.

Carl Van Horn: Yeah, actually, my wife and I both coached some of those folks during that project, which was founded really by Phil and Tammy Murphy, now the governor of New Jersey and Tammy, the First Lady. This was when they were in their philanthropic only phase of their careers and served 6,000 people with that support and a lot of support from other people around the country. So, yeah, that was a very good experience and we thank you for...

Jane Oates: Groundbreaking. I mean, nobody else was talking about older workers in 2018 except AARP, you know, and you really had results. You've done so many incredible things before that and since then, but that was a wonderful story to tell. And we got, and I know you got, lots of positives about that. So that, that's the power of storytelling.

Carl Van Horn: No, you're right. And I think, as you pointed out, you need the storytellers, but you also need the Jane Oates' who have the expertise, who can separate the shiny objects from not just shiny, but also ones you should keep. And I think that's, that is obviously something WorkingNation has done. How do you, I mean, obviously I've seen the products many people have, I'm sure who watch this podcast, but how do you measure with the audience? First of all, what was your main audience? Mr. Bilger obviously had a very ambitious idea, which I respect. But at the end of the day, as you think about it, who is tuning in, paying attention to these very interesting stories that you put together?

Jane Oates: So, I'll tell you from the beginning, you know, Art wanted to attract three audiences. One were influencers. People like you mentioned, Governor Murphy and his wife, who if they saw a really good idea could say, "Wait a minute, I can fund that in my own

community". So, that was one very important audience because all these great ideas need money to be implemented. The second audience was really the people doing the work. You know, you have these great people doing things in New Jersey. How do they connect with people who are doing like things and learn from them in the other 49 states? You know, how do they learn about it? And then how do people learn about the great things going on in New Jersey and replicate those? And finally, for me, the most important audience, you know, are just regular people around their kitchen table when they're making the important decision of, you know, what should my kid do after high school? What's the benefit of going right to work financially and not only for the here and now, but for building a professional life, building a career. And those are the people that I think get misused so much by the system. So, we wanted to make sure they were getting accurate information and good ideas. Even if, you know, we did a story about a program in Washington state, you know, how could a person living, you know, in Alabama learn from that? They could learn the key elements of a successful program. And then when they went to a local program, ask if they did some of these things. So, a clear example is, is there a direct connection with an employer? So, when I finished my training, there are people who have actually gotten hired.

Carl Van Horn: Did you collect what I call "love letters" from people writing and say, "hey, I saw this and it's been great". I mean, I could see sometimes in this situation, certainly we face it, we put a lot of stuff out there, but we're not always sure what's getting heard and acted on. Tell us some of those stories. I'm sure you've had some.

Jane Oates: Two really impactful. Back in 2017, nobody was talking about impact funding. Now it's all they're talking about. So, I'll give you two really meaningful impacts to me. In 2019, we did a story about native people in Alaska and the difficulty they were having getting dentists. So, a dentist might come, you know, once a month to some of these more rural areas in Alaska. So, they developed, and this is all tribal nations, they developed a job title that was between a dental hygienist and a dentist. So, this dental technician, you know, we think of a technician as maybe building bridges or caps if you're getting them in your mouth. These technicians could actually get the skills and the certification that they could do more than cleaning. They could do extractions if a dentist wasn't there. They could do remediation. You know, they could give you little amalgam fillings if you needed it. And it was so effective. People don't think about it, you know? Your dental health is the first step in your digestive health. So, these people were really suffering, young people and old people, unnecessarily.

So, we did this story, terrific story, you know, and people say, oh, Alaska, you know, native tribes. Well, that story enabled the Alaskan Natives to share it with other tribal nations in the lower States. And all of a sudden other tribal nations started doing that same certifications, copied, learned from, did the whole thing. But then we saw rural states doing it. By 2022, both Montana and Utah were looking at this as a model for their rural areas. Who has the ability to do that kind of impact?

The second one I would tell you is healthcare as well. We did a story about a four-year college in Minnesota that had a program for people learning to make prosthetics. You know, people lose a limb and they have to, the idea of fitting it and making it and making it perfect and all that stuff, really difficult. Well, in 2019 when we did that story, there were two four-year colleges doing that program in the United States. Today there's six. Because that story went out. Why should people have to wait, whether they're veterans or people who had an unfortunate

accident as a civilian, why should they have to wait weeks to get the right prosthetic, whether it's arm, leg, whatever, you know, why? Because there's not a sufficient workforce supply. We really feel very proud of that and very proud of the story, the way we told it, and very proud of the fact that it had that kind of impact.

Carl Van Horn: Yeah, I think one of the frustrations that many people have in government and in nonprofits is they're on a treadmill where they don't really have time or support to go tell the stories. And so obviously, I think you hit a sweet spot there because that is... Even organizations like ours that we try to spend a lot of time on that, but we can't spend all of our time on that. That's usually something that, especially government agencies and even foundations, don't pay for. So, I'm not sure there is an analogous organization to what you did at WorkingNation.

Jane Oates: Yeah, I'm really proud of it. And I'm really proud of the incredibly talented people that made beautiful products and told beautiful stories because we did journalism as well.

Carl Van Horn: Yeah, I think you're the only organization... Weren't you at the South by Southwest Conference?

Jane Oates: Every year.

Carl Van Horn: Talk about that, because that's an audience of people who not expect for such a wonky topic.

Jane Oates: Well, we did South by Southwest EDU and we kind of encouraged them. That's not the big glitzy music and movie thing, but, you know, it was really when it started a K-12 conference, nothing wrong with that, right? But we started them thinking about how do you build a workforce component into that? Because the reality is a lot of American kids leave high school and go right to work. And historically that was a financial necessity. Today it's a good investment strategy because your employer can pay for your post-secondary education, y'know. So, we had a great time with them and ASU GSV, the same thing, getting investors to really think...you know, we kind of pushed the envelope a little bit there. You know, ASU GSV is really ed tech and VC investors and that's where Art was really helpful. He knew those folks. We got there and said you should be investing in public private partnerships that bring education and business together. You should be investing in public private partnerships that bring training, you know, nonprofits together with the businesses. So, we feel really proud of that as well. You know, lots of people made connections there because of, we did a series, our editor in chief, Ramona Schindelheim, did interviews there which we called Overheard and then we put them out. It was it was both a democratization of those very expensive conferences, people that don't have the money to pay the registration and the travel could see who was there, hear their ideas and things like that, but it was also a great way to promote those conferences. And we were very excited to do that in partnership with many people, but certainly South By and ASU being the biggest ones.

Carl Van Horn: Are there other organizations that became echo chambers of your work that also passed along to their constituencies? You know, different CBOs, national organizations, or did they remain in their own silos?

Jane Oates: You know, first of all, the media people, I think we've seen a tremendous growth of Inside Higher Ed. We've seen open, you know, Open Campus. We've seen the folks at Heckinger really do some amazing work in that place. Road Trip Nation in a very different way, telling the stories in a kind of MTV kind of way that we didn't, but really the same quality, I think, in the same initiative. In terms of the people who were echo chambers for us, probably two of the biggest were SkillsUSA, which is the national competition for people in CTE, career and technical education programs at secondary and post-secondary, and Goodwill. You know, the largest training provider in the United States has been a tremendous partner with us on doing a number of things and a great distribution partner. And then I can't, you know, PBS has been terrific. They've done probably six of our town halls. They've put them five or six, they've put them on and that's been very helpful. I mean, Carl, the biggest challenge when you're trying to do something like this is distribution. You know, going back to those three audiences that I spoke about, how do you get to those three very... You know, CEOs are watching and reading very different things than mom and pops around that kitchen table. So how do you make sure you're working with people who help you get to all three of them? That's probably been our biggest challenge and we've made some headway in each of those, but every day that became an issue. How do we distribute better?

Carl Van Horn: Yeah, no, it's always a challenge, I think, for any policy domain, but workforce education is so decentralized, right? I mean, that's its main characteristic. You know, everything from, like you said, Goodwill to essentially mom and pop operations, all of them doing good work or trying to do good work. So, how do you reach that vast audience? Government can't do it alone. You know, there really, there's just so many channels, right?

Jane Oates: That's exactly right. I mean, I think the interesting thing for local people, I mean, we hope that with the move to the digital world, that storytelling is going to be much less expensive and much easier for smaller entities to do. You know, I mean, basically, I don't want to diminish. We did, you know, Hollywood quality productions. Is that necessary, you know, in order to get the message out that you want to get out right now, you could do that with your smartphone. And, you know, as long as you know the message that you wanna give out and how to tailor that message to the specific groups, I think those are the things that we've tried to teach people, that it's not necessary to be on PBS. It's nice, it's a wonderful plus. But, you know, are there, are there specific distribution partners that you could get in your local area, whether it's the free newspaper at the grocery store, whether it's getting on the back of some grocery store receipts, if you can work that out, you know, I mean, that's not video, or it's getting in public access television. I mean, which can be much more impactful for a local area than being on, you know, 60 Minutes.

Carl Van Horn: Yeah, I mean I live in a small town in New Jersey and the way to find out what's going on is go on the town's Facebook page. I mean, you can, everything gets, you know, whatever happened, good or bad, is there, because there's no local, it's a town of 14,000 people. There's no newspaper and there are almost no newspapers at all that cover New Jersey anyway. But as you said, it's those other channels that people eventually get to find where they can find out what's going on.

Jane Oates: That's right. And if you have a video, you know, how do you use those local channels Facebook page to, say, go on YouTube and this is the way to get there, to see the story of what we're doing, to meet our completers, our graduates, to talk about them two years

after the program finishes, where they are in their career. Did my training at X provider lead them really to a career path? Have they seen over two years changes in their earnings or changes in their job title? Those are the key things that people want to know. And you can do that in no more than three or four minutes and put it... You know, I worked for Senator Kennedy, as you know, and Senator Kennedy had this amazing term that has stayed with me my whole life. It's "Put a face on it". People don't want to hear facts, they don't want to hear data. Obviously, we know that now. They want to hear a compelling human story and you can do that yourself. And everybody in New Jersey, everybody around the country who's listening to this podcast, knows that compelling human story attached to their program. Tell it, tell it broadly.

Carl Van Horn: I think one of the disconnects is almost everybody in the policy world speaks in policy jargon and not in the ways they would perhaps, let's say, talk to their children or grandchildren, you know, which is different.

Jane Oates: That's right. That's right.

Carl Van Horn: We have to learn more to talk that way because, you know, we have a lot of slogans, right? And so right now, and exaggerating, so, one now, one of the slogans now is you don't need to go to college. Well, right, that's a wrap, right? You don't need to go to college. What does that really mean? I mean, is it a marketing slogan? Is it, is it a point of view because somehow college is bad? I mean, the answer is there's options and think about those options, right?

Quick story, years ago, we were doing work with the pharmaceutical industry. And for those people who don't know that, the pharmacy industry is giant in New Jersey. And so we did a survey of high school students and less than 2 % of them knew that there were thousands and thousands of careers in the pharmaceutical biotech industry. Because where are they going to get that? Where are they going to get that information? If their parents and neighbors don't know that, their relatives, they wouldn't know that. I mean, they don't look at the labels Johnson and Johnson and say, "Oh, I could work there".

Jane Oates: Yeah, no, no. You're exactly right. And, you know, we do... Look teachers get slammed, you know, I started as a teacher and it's, really interesting to me that teachers only know about quality teaching. Very few K-12 teachers, except in career and technical education, have worked anywhere else but education. So, their knowledge is based the same as most families, in their personal network. So, if they knew people who were tellers at banks, that's what they tell their kids. They don't know any of the other jobs that are involved in finance and banking. So, I think that labor market information and the career exposure is really important. And, by the way, I think it's one of the things we as a nation... Career navigation is one of the things we still need to do a lot of work on. Whether it's talking to kids about what their options are when they graduate from high school or college and, you know, I think the 21st century, we should say to kids coming out of college, you may not want to go to college now, but we need to revamp our higher ed system. So, after you've worked for five years, you can come back. I mean, you shouldn't make it to have to make a decision at 18 that influences the ceiling on your education for life, because there has never been a time when lifelong learning is more important.

Carl, I'm going to ask you a question. Were there smartphones when you and I went to school? No. Was there an internet? No. You know, I mean, we had to learn all these things as practicing adults, you know, as part of our job. And with AI, you know, I don't have the fear of AI, but I do think AI, just like technology in general, is going to evolve at a speed that we haven't seen before. And we're going to have to learn how to use it well and adapt so that we get the benefit of it.

Carl Van Horn: Yeah, that's absolutely right. And I think generally speaking across the nation, the career advising, vocational advising, at the high school level has pretty much disappeared. Not obviously in every, this is very large country, but I know in New Jersey, it's much less emphasized than it was before because of all the other activities people have put on the high schools and junior high schools that they're now responsible for, right?

Jane Oates: I don't know how they do it. I mean, it's like drinking from a fire hose every day when you're teaching. Most important thing are the kids, but you have to worry about all the crazy stuff, you know, like bus schedules and lunch, preps, you know, all this stuff comes in. And this idea, we still haven't come very far as a country about giving teachers enough time. We still, particularly in middle school and high school, have these blocks of time that are not associated with deep learning. You know, I mean, 45 minutes to get your idea across, get kids a chance to practice it, and really have a teacher be able to informally assess what he or she should do the next day. Forget it. I mean, and block scheduling had its moment, but like every other trend in education, it had its moment and then it was gone. In most places.

Carl Van Horn: Yeah, that's right. I mean, we actually work with the state of New Jersey's Department of Education on what they call the Career Assistance Navigator. And the counselors were just hungry for that opportunity to learn how to deliver in the short period of time that they had. But again, that was one of those projects that was funded, but then...

Jane Oates: Then it goes away.

Carl Van Horn: Then it goes away.

Jane Oates: And poor counselors, I don't know what the ratio is in New Jersey, but you know, the national ratio is one counselor to 400 students. So, that's to do career navigation, course selection, discipline, IEP paperwork. I mean, I don't know how counselors in public schools do it.

Carl Van Horn: No, I mean, if I was pinned up against the wall and said, what's the two or three recommendations, that would be one of them, which would be hire more counselors.

Jane Oates: Absolutely.

Carl Van Horn: Train more of them, get more of those people. Because, again, if outside your family, you don't know what the world is about, which is true for most of us, how do you know? How do you know that you could be fill in the blank?

Jane Oates: Yeah, that's right. They don't even know the names of the job titles. And you know what, Carl, that's only going to get worse. I mean, because there's going to be new jobs

being created all the time, people giving them titles. How do you prepare for a job that you don't even know exists?

Carl Van Horn: Yeah, by the way, did you do a session on, or any of your projects on, AI or try to do that at this point or is too hard to do that yet?

Jane Oates: You know, we did, we, we've done a number of articles on it and we did a thing with, actually with LinkedIn. you know, one of their LinkedIn learning things about, you know, the promise of AI in different sectors. Because when we did that probably about 18 months ago with LinkedIn, the biggest thing that higher ed was doing was buying lots of software to detect plagiarism. Like that was how they initially, I think they've come a lot further in the 18 months since then. But I mean, as. as schools, as you hear this kind of religious fervor about not letting kids use their phones in school, not letting them use this, not letting... You're like, we should be teaching kids how to use technology responsibly, how not to be afraid of it. And I understand the issues with having cell phones in schools and I, I respect school districts decisions, but we should be having separate sessions on how do you use a smartphone, not to play on TikTok, but to get the information that you need? And how do you validate that information? How do you make sure you're sifting through? Because the internet to me is like the worst of the Yellow Pages, right? There's no quality assurance control on anything. How do you teach young people and not so young people to be consumers of information in a way that they can say, wait a minute, this is not real. You know, this is fake. So, and I hate to use the term fake news, that's not what I mean. I mean that there's information out there that's just factually incorrect and we should be training and educating our students on how to disertain that.

Carl Van Horn: Yeah, I mean, it's always been thus, but it's just much harder now, right, for people, especially young people, to, to make those distinctions.

Jane Oates: Yeah

Carl Van Horn: Well, that was a talk of the future. Let's go past. Let's go back. I think that everybody has a good recollection of their first job that they were paid to do. I'd love to hear what your experience was like and what it was and what did you learn from it? What did you take away from that experience when you were a young lady?

Jane Oates: So, I grew up in Philadelphia and every year from the end of school to the opening of school, I had myself in Margate, New Jersey. So, the best job in Margate when you were 14 was the Margate Dairy Bar. You know, you learned to twist ice cream, you learn to do a grill, and you saw everybody who was anybody, whether they were there, you know, year-round, whether they were there for the summer or whether they were there for two weeks.

So, it was a fun job and I learned all the things, all the durable skills that I have I learned that summer, right? You had to be there on time; if you were opening, you had to be there on time. If you were second shift, because people couldn't leave until you got there, you had to clean your station. You know, you had to do customer service, all of those things, and the cleaning up after yourself was chocolate ice cream at the Margate Dairy Bar, but the cleaning up after yourself in all the jobs that I've had is taking responsibility for your actions and making sure you were ready for whatever is next. So, I mean, and you had to learn how to deal with a grumpy employer sometimes, you know, on rainy days, the business at the Margate Dairy Bar was not

great and he was paying a couple of us to be there and paying to be open and he was cranky, you know? And days when it was sunny and we were going at 90, he was really the pleasant person that he was. But it really taught you how to deal with supervision. It taught me how to deal with other workers who had different working styles than I did. And I carried that on. And my last thing I would say about that is I realized there was a limited amount of money. You know, why aren't I still working at the Margate Dairy Bar because I loved it. It was a minimum amount of money. You made as much money as you could make per hour. You could work more hours, but they were only open so many hours. So, I wanted to get another job where I could make more money. I stayed in the same field and moved over to be a waitress at Leonardo's on Ventnor Avenue in Margate when I was 16. And, that was a waitstaff job where you got tips and made much more money. And I think it's the same in every job. I stayed in the sector. And by the way, even when I was teaching, I came back to Margate every summer and waitressed at Leonardo's.

Carl Van Horn: Well, no one goes away from an ice cream stand unhappy unless they drop it on their way out the door. Thank you so much for ending on that happy note. I feel like I should go get a dish of ice cream right away.

Thank you for sharing a bit of your experience. It would take us hours to go through all the interesting things you've done in your career and lessons you've learned, but this is a nice snapshot of WorkingNation and what you've done here. And congratulate you on that and you and your colleagues. So, thanks for joining us.

Jane Oates: This was really fun. Thank you so much.

Carl Van Horn: Thank you.

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*)